

Combating Terrorism Center at West Point



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FEATURE ARTICLE

## The Berlin Attack and the Abu Walaa Network

What the connections to the Islamic State could mean for Europe  
GEORG HEIL

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

## GEN John W. Nicholson

COMMANDER, RESOLUTE SUPPORT AND  
U.S. FORCES-AFGHANISTAN

# Contents

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## FEATURE ARTICLE

- 1 The Berlin Attack and the “Abu Walaa” Islamic State Recruitment Network**  
GEORG HEIL

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## INTERVIEW

- 12 A View from the CT Foxhole: General John W. Nicholson, Commander, Resolute Support and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan**  
BRIAN DODWELL AND DON RASSLER

---

## ANALYSIS

- 16 The Formation of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham and Wider Tensions in the Syrian Insurgency**  
AYMENN AL-TAMIMI
- 21 The Islamic State’s Western Teenage Plotters**  
ROBIN SIMCOX
- 27 The Islamic State Looks East: The Growing Threat in Southeast Asia**  
SHASHI JAYAKUMAR
- 34 The Fulani Crisis: Communal Violence and Radicalization in the Sahel**  
ANDREW MCGREGOR

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## FROM THE EDITOR

In an extensive interview, General John W. Nicholson, commander of Resolute Support and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, stresses the importance of preventing the country from again becoming a platform for international terrorism, noting counterterrorism operations have almost halved the fighting strength of the Islamic State’s local affiliate since the beginning of last year. He also outlines the ongoing effort to empower Afghan efforts against the Taliban, saying: “They’re at a bit of a stalemate. The government holds about two-thirds of the population. The enemy holds a solid 8 to 10 percent. ... We think [if] we get to about 80 percent or more, we start to reach a tipping point where the insurgency becomes more irrelevant.”

Our cover story by Georg Heil focuses on the deadly truck attack this past December in Berlin by Anis Amri, a Tunisian extremist suspected of links to Islamic State operatives in Libya. Investigations have made clear the danger posed by the radical network he belonged to in northwestern Germany led by an Iraqi preacher named Abu Walaa. It is believed to have recruited dozens to travel to join the Islamic State, communicated extensively with Islamic State operatives in Syria and Iraq, and encouraged attacks on German soil. Heil argues the high level of interconnectedness between these radicals in Germany and the Islamic State has potentially grave implications for European security.

Aymenn al-Tamimi looks at the implications of the recent realignment of rebel and jihadi groups in Syria, which created two potentially conflicting power centers revolving around an enlarged Ahrar al-Sham and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, a new al-Qa`ida-aligned umbrella grouping. Robin Simcox finds Islamic State plots by pre-teens and teens are increasing in the West, with plotters in contact with the group in a majority of such cases. Shashi Jayakumar examines the growing Islamic State threat to Southeast Asia, arguing the group may pose as big a threat in the future in the East as in the West. Andrew McGregor warns growing clashes between Fulani Muslim herders and settled Christian communities in Nigeria could be exploited by terrorist groups and potentially destabilize the entire Sahel-West Africa region.

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*Cover: The truck driven by extremist Anis Amri through a Christmas market near the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin is pictured on December 20, 2016. (Tobias Schwarz/AFP/Getty Images)*

# The Berlin Attack and the “Abu Walaa” Islamic State Recruitment Network

By Georg Heil

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**The Berlin truck attack last December by Anis Amri, a Tunisian extremist suspected of communicating with Islamic State operatives in Libya, was not just the first fatal Islamic State-linked attack on German soil. It also exposed the danger posed by a radical network that Amri belonged to in northwestern Germany. The network, led by Iraqi preacher Abu Walaa, is believed to have recruited dozens to travel to join the Islamic State, communicated extensively with Islamic State operatives in Syria and Iraq, and encouraged attacks on German soil. What investigators are learning about the network could have severe implications for European security.**

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**O**n December 19, 2016, Tunisian extremist Anis Amri hijacked a heavy truck after shooting and killing its driver and drove it through the Christmas market in Berlin’s *Breitscheidplatz*, killing 11 and wounding 55. Four days later, the Islamic State-affiliated news agency Amaq released a video of Amri in which he had pledged allegiance to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and vowed to slaughter “crusaders who are shelling the Muslims every day.”<sup>1</sup> The *Breitscheidplatz* attack was the first confirmed Islamic State-related terror attack in Germany that resulted in fatalities.

Prior to the attack, German law enforcement agencies were well aware Amri was a sympathizer of the Islamic State and had talked about committing an attack.<sup>2</sup> They were also aware that he was in contact with both Islamic State operatives outside of Germany<sup>3</sup> and the so-called Abu Walaa network, a recruiting network for the Islamic State in Germany headed by 32-year-old Iraqi salafi preacher Ahmad Abdulaziz Abdullah Abdullah, known to his followers as Abu Walaa.<sup>4</sup> One former militant, recruited by Abu Walaa for the Islamic State, labeled the Iraqi preacher the “Islamic State’s top representative in Germany” in his interrogation by German security officials after his defection from the group.<sup>5</sup> Abu Walaa’s proselytization efforts created a cluster of extremists in Germany similar to those around other charismatic preachers in Europe such as Abu Hamza al-Masri<sup>6</sup> at London’s Finsbury Park mosque; Anjem Choudary<sup>7</sup> and Islam4UK; Fouad Belkacem and the Shari-

a4Belgium group in Antwerp;<sup>8</sup> Mirsad Omerovic (aka Ebu Tejma) in Austria,<sup>9</sup> with which the Abu Walaa network was at least loosely connected;<sup>10</sup> and Khalid al-Zerkani’s network in Brussels.<sup>11</sup> German investigators believe the Abu Walaa network, operating primarily out of Dortmund and Duisburg in North Rhine-Westphalia and Hildesheim in Lower Saxony, partly financed itself by “stealing from the infidels” through burglaries, much like the Zerkani network, as well as with fraudulent loans.<sup>12</sup>

This article draws on court documents, investigative files, and interviews with German counterterrorism officials and months of investigative reporting to outline Amri’s background, radical trajectory, execution of the *Breitscheidplatz* attack, and ties to the Abu Walaa network. It details key figures of the Abu Walaa network and how they operated, indoctrinated, recruited, and communicated. It then also examines what is known about the links between the Abu Walaa network and Islamic State operatives in Syria. Finally, this article examines the implications for the threat moving forward in Germany and Europe.

## Anis Amri’s Pathway to Terror

Anis Ben Othmane Amri was born on December 22, 1992, in Tataouine, Tunisia. He grew up in Oueslatia in the Kairouan Governorate in northern Tunisia<sup>13</sup> with three brothers and five sisters.<sup>14</sup> Though the area where he grew up is known to be a salafi stronghold—where groups like Ansar al Sharia used to hold public recruitment drives<sup>15</sup>—there is no indication that he became radicalized while living in Tunisia. Instead, he was a troublemaker who dropped out of school when he was 15, lived off occasional jobs, and turned to drugs and alcohol. “My son Anis drank and stole, but he was radicalized in Europe,” Amri’s father said after the Berlin attack.<sup>16</sup> In 2010, Amri stole a vehicle and was sentenced to prison by a Kairouan court.<sup>17</sup> But amid the chaos of the Tunisian revolution, he managed to avoid prison by fleeing the country.

When Amri entered the European Union on April 4, 2011,<sup>18</sup> via the Italian island of Lampedusa, he claimed to be 16 years old.<sup>a</sup> After his arrival, he was placed in a refugee shelter for minors in Belpasso, Sicily. The Italian authorities asked Tunisia for travel documents in order to return Amri to his home country, but the request went unanswered.<sup>19</sup> In October 2011, Amri and four other Tunisian refugees attacked a staff member at the shelter and started a fire.<sup>20</sup> Amri was arrested and sentenced to four years in prison. It

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*Georg Heil is a Berlin-based investigative journalist who focuses on national security and Islamist terrorism. He has worked for public German broadcaster WDR and was part of a team that investigated the Abu Walaa network for more than a year for a documentary, which aired on ARD on November 8, 2016—the day Abu Walaa was arrested. As part of his reporting, he spoke to one of those recruited by the group—Islamic State defector Anil O.—in Turkey. Follow @Georg\_Heil*

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a Later, Tunisian authorities would inform the Italians that Amri was in fact 18 years old and therefore an adult according to Italian law. Chronology on Amri released by the German Federal Interior Ministry, January 17, 2017, <https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/2017/01/veroeffentlichung-chronologie-anis-amri.html>

was during his incarceration in different Italian jails<sup>b</sup> that Amri became radicalized.<sup>21</sup> A report for the Italian Committee for Strategic Anti-Terrorism Analysis (CASA) stated that Amri was considered a “dangerous person” and a “leader of the Islamists in prison” and that he was “transferred due to severe security concerns.” Amri had threatened and attacked staff<sup>22</sup> and reportedly threatened to decapitate a Christian inmate.<sup>23</sup>

On June 17, 2015, Italy was legally required to release Amri from a deportation facility because Tunisian authorities had not responded to its request to send travel documents for him.<sup>24</sup> After his release, Amri traveled to Switzerland, where he stayed for around two weeks before traveling to Germany.<sup>25</sup> In early July 2015, German police in the city of Freiburg, near the Swiss border, registered Amri for “unlawful entry” under the name Anis Amir and took his fingerprints and photo.<sup>c</sup>

In the first six months after his arrival in Germany, between July and December 2015, Amri registered at least five times as an asylum seeker under different identities.<sup>26 d</sup> Altogether, he would use 14 identities in Germany.<sup>27</sup>

Under his different names,<sup>28</sup> he attracted police attention several times—for example, for stealing a bicycle, hitting a security guard with a fist in the face,<sup>e</sup> and having pictures of people in black robes posing with AKs on his cell phone. In November 2015, a police informant within the Abu Walaa network, known as “VP01,” told state criminal police in North Rhine-Westphalia that an individual named “Anis” wanted to do “something here” and that he claimed he wanted to get a Kalashnikov in France or Italy.<sup>f</sup>

Amri attended classes at “Madrasa Dortmund,” a Qur’an school in the eponymous German city. He also had keys to the building and often slept there overnight.<sup>29</sup> The school was run by Boban Simeonovic, a Serbian and German national who had converted to Islam<sup>30</sup> and had allegedly become a top deputy to Abu Walaa.<sup>31</sup> Simeonovic was something of a guru to Amri. He mentored him



Anis Amri in the attack claim video he filmed on the Kieler Bridge (Amaq)

and allegedly expressed approval when he discovered Amri’s desire to launch some kind of attack in Germany, according to the informant VP01.<sup>32</sup> At the time, police considered Amri a messenger for the Abu Walaa network.<sup>33</sup> A police profile of Amri lists five contacts in “Madrasa Dortmund,” including Simeonovic. Also on the list is Hasan Celenk, a 51-year-old Turkish-Kurdish preacher who, alongside Simeonovic, was allegedly the other top deputy to Abu Walaa.<sup>34</sup> Besides talking about committing an attack in Germany, Amri also aspired to join the Islamic State in Syria. According to investigative files, in December 2015 and January 2016, Simeonovic talked to others in the Abu Walaa network about organizing the logistics in order to send Amri to Syria.<sup>35</sup> The informant VP01 reported Amri participated in a hike with heavy backpacks that Simeonovic had organized to improve the physical fitness of those who were about to leave for Syria.<sup>36</sup>

In late 2015, Amri began commuting between Berlin and North Rhine-Westphalia. He was occasionally under police surveillance, and his phone calls were intercepted.<sup>36</sup> Underscoring the interconnections between extremists in Germany, Amri’s name appeared in two other terror-related police investigations. One was an investigation into three Tunisian nationals, where Amri was flagged for being a contact person of a contact person of the three.<sup>h</sup> He was also flagged as a result of intercepted phone calls<sup>37</sup> that were wiretapped in an investigation against Tunisian national Bilel Ben Ammar,<sup>38 i</sup> who was a close contact of Amri.<sup>39</sup> The two men had dinner together on the night prior to the *Breitscheidplatz* attack, and Amri occasionally stayed in Ben Ammar’s room in a refugee shelter in Berlin.<sup>40</sup> Both men also attended prayers at the Fussilet mosque in Berlin, which Amri visited on the day of the attack and

b This article names prisons in Enna, Sciacca, Agrigento, Palermo, and Caltanissetta. Elisa Sguaitamatti and Chris Delis, “New Information Surfaces on Killed Terrorist Anis Amri, as Italian Investigation Continues,” Balkananalysis blog, December 24, 2016.

c It appears that the misspelling of his name was not by mistake but that Amri intentionally provided false information; the date of birth was noted as 12/23/1993 instead of the correct date of 12/22/1992. “Unlawful entry” is a violation of German law (§14 AufenthaltG). Amri was not allowed to enter Germany because he did not have a visa and passport. Under the Dublin regulation, Germany was not responsible for examining any application under the Geneva Convention because Amri must have entered through another European Union country in which he could have applied for asylum. However, he could not be deported because he had no documents. Chronology on Amri released by the German Federal Interior Ministry, January 17, 2017.

d According to a profile of Anis Amri in a police file, he registered in Berlin, Dortmund, Münster, and Hamburg and used the aliases Mohamed Hassa, Ahmed Almasri, Ahmad Zaghoul, Mohammad Hassan, Anis Amir, and Ahmad Zarzour.

e A police investigation against Ahmad Zaghoul (i.e. Amri) was later halted because “Zaghoul” had disappeared. Author interview, German intelligence official, January 2016. The basic fact, without the exact date, was also reported by *Der Spiegel* and quoted in “Staatsanwaltschaft Duisburg ermittelte gegen Amri wegen Betrugs,” *Die Zeit*, December 29, 2016.

f VP stands for *Vertrauensperson*, which translates to trusted person. German Public Prosecutor General of the Federal Court of Justice, case file in the investigation against Hasan Celenk, Boban Simeonovic, and A. Abdulaziz Abdullah.

g The police informant, “VP01,” stated he thought Amri was among the hikers. VP01 did not participate in the hike. German Public Prosecutor General of the Federal Court of Justice, case file in the investigation against Hasan Celenk, Boban Simeonovic, and A. Abdulaziz Abdullah.

h The investigation was named “Eisbär,” which means polar bear. Author interview, German police official, February 2017.

i Germany’s Public Prosecutor General investigated whether Ben Ammar had helped Amri in carrying out the attack but did not find sufficient evidence. Ben Ammar, who used 18 different identities in Germany, denied those accusations. He claimed he did not know anything about the attack and that he had bought cocaine and hashish from Amri. Ben Ammar was deported to Tunisia on February 1, 2017. Lena Kampf and Georg Mascolo, “Amris Freund soll abgeschoben werden,” ARD, January 27, 2017.

where he used to sleep occasionally.<sup>41</sup> The Fussilet mosque is run by an association named “Fussilet 33 e.V.,” which had already attracted police attention for suspected Islamic State recruiting.<sup>j</sup>

In January 2016, the federal interior intelligence service, BfV, noted that Amri was traveling under different identities to Berlin, North Rhine-Westphalia, Lower Saxony, and Baden-Württemberg.<sup>42</sup> During this time, he had conversations with other members of the Abu Walaa network, urging them to carry out an attack with him. Nevertheless, in early February, federal criminal police BKA assessed the probability of an attack carried out by Amri at 7 out of 8, which, under its definition, means an attack can nearly be ruled out.<sup>43k</sup> On February 12, Amri was photographed at the DIK mosque in Hildesheim,<sup>44</sup> where Abu Walaa preached. The criminal police in North Rhine-Westphalia classified Amri as a *Gefährder*<sup>45m</sup> (individual posing a threat) on February 17, 2016.<sup>45</sup> The next day, Berlin police stopped Amri upon his arrival at the central bus station and confiscated his mobile phone on the grounds it had been stolen.<sup>46</sup> Later, an analysis of the phone would reveal that Amri had searched for information about the production of pipe bombs on the internet<sup>47</sup> and that he had two Libyan phone numbers among his contacts,<sup>48</sup> with which he communicated via the Telegram messenger.<sup>49</sup> German foreign intelligence service BND linked the Libyan numbers to the Islamic State.<sup>50</sup> On January 19, 2017, four weeks after the Berlin attack, the United States struck two Islamic State camps southwest of Sirte, Libya, after intelligence reportedly indicated the possible presence of external attack plotters with suspected links to the *Breitscheidplatz* attack.<sup>51</sup>

When law enforcement agencies learned that Amri was planning on stealing goods from the house of a wealthy Lebanese outside Berlin in order to acquire money for the purchase of weapons, the Berlin prosecutor launched an official investigation. From April 2016, Amri was placed under surveillance in Berlin and his phone wiretapped.<sup>n</sup> The intercepted conversations made plain his Isla-

mist ideology but also his involvement in ordinary crime like fraud and theft. From May, Amri’s conversations increasingly centered on criminal enterprises and his wish to return to Tunisia rather than being Islamist in content.<sup>o</sup> German investigators were aware he dealt drugs and that he consumed ecstasy and cocaine, which contributed to the assessment that he did not post an imminent threat.<sup>52</sup>

In July, Amri was involved in an assault on a dealer in the drug scene around Berlin’s Görlitzer Park. Then, on July 30, he was arrested in a bus when he tried to leave for Switzerland with falsified Italian identification cards. Investigators believe Amri was possibly on his way back to Tunisia. After two days in custody pending deportation, he was released because German authorities had no verification of his identity from Tunisia.<sup>53</sup> In September and October, Moroccan intelligence warned Germany that Amri was an Islamic State sympathizer. The Moroccans told Germans that Amri hoped to join the Islamic State in Syria or Libya and was undertaking an unspecified “project.”<sup>p</sup> The Moroccan warning seems to be related to Amri’s part-time roommate<sup>54</sup> Toufik N., a Moroccan national whose parents allegedly were Islamic State sympathizers and whose father had cousins who were Islamic State members.<sup>55</sup>

Most of what Amri did between the end of the wiretap of his phone on September 21 and the attack on December 19 is still unclear. Investigators have established Amri shot the video in which he pledges *bay`a* to al-Baghdadi and vows to slaughter “crusaders” on October 31 or November 1, about seven weeks prior to the attack.<sup>56</sup>

Five days before the attack, on December 14, Amri came to Berlin.<sup>q</sup> Both the phone he used at this point and the prepaid SIM card inside it originated in Switzerland,<sup>57r</sup> as did his gun, a .22 caliber, German-made Erma.<sup>58</sup> On December 18, one day before the attack, Amri met his friend, the suspected Tunisian extremist Bilel Ben Ammar, for dinner at a restaurant.

On the day of the attack, Amri repeatedly called a former roommate (investigators have not said which one), but it remains unclear if they actually spoke.<sup>59</sup> In the afternoon, Amri went to the

j The association also ran “Dagestan Mosque” in Berlin, which was closed after Imam Ghazimurad Khanov (also known as Murad Atajev) was arrested on suspicion of recruiting for the Islamic State. “Berliner Imam kommt vor Gericht,” RBB, March 22, 2016.

k The BKA levels range from 1 (assume attack will happen) to 8 (can be ruled out). For more information, see “Anschlagsrisiko galt als eher unwahrscheinlich,” *Ostsee Zeitung*, January 5, 2017.

l According to a German intelligence official the author spoke to in February 2017, there is only proof that Amri visited Hildesheim on this one occasion. The official said a second suspected visit has not yet been proven. Police informant “VP01” named six individuals, among them “Anis,” who had traveled to Hildesheim regularly (according to the case file). While this does not prove Amri had met with Abu Walaa, he would have also had plenty of opportunity to meet him in Dortmund, where Abu Walaa would often visit the “Madrasa Dortmund.”

m On February 18, 2016, one day after he was officially labeled a *Gefährder*, the BKA switched the risk level of Amri from 7 to 5, a higher risk but still meaning it is “rather unlikely that an attack will occur.” There are currently approximately 550 individuals labeled as *Gefährder*. A significant number of them are German foreign fighters in Syria, and an estimated 150 of them are foreigners within Germany. For more on this designation, see Florian Flade, “Zahlen, Fakten & Gedanken zum Gefährder,” *Ojihad Blog*, December 23, 2016.

n In June, the surveillance of Amri was stopped because it did not bring any evidence of the supposed burglary plan. The wiretap on his phone was terminated on September 21, 2016. Chronology on Amri released by the German Federal Interior Ministry, January 17, 2017.

o Amri first spoke about his wish to return to Tunisia in mid-May 2016. According to the chronology of the Federal Interior Ministry, German Federal Criminal Police BKA informed police in Berlin and North Rhine-Westphalia on May 6 that they had sent an officer to Tunisia, who handed out photos and fingerprints to Tunisian authorities. Then, in August, German authorities asked the Tunisian General Consulate in Bonn for travel documents for Amri and provided the General Consulate with Amri’s fingerprints. But the request was declined because the General Consulate claimed the person was unknown. It was not until two days after the attack that German authorities received the travel documents from Tunisia that were needed to deport him. Chronology on Amri released by the German Federal Interior Ministry, January 17, 2017. See also interview with Tunisian PM Youssef Chaeed, “Tunisian authorities have made no mistake,” *Bild*, February 13, 2017.

p German officials do not know what this project referred to. Author interview, German counterterrorism expert and intelligence official, February 2017.

q The information was reconstructed by the analysis of his mobile phone, which was found at the scene in *Breitscheidplatz*. Christoph Sydow and Thies Schnack, “77 Stunden quer durch Europa,” *Der Spiegel*, January 5, 2017.

r The Switzerland angles to Amri’s story remain unclear.

Friedrich-Krause-Ufer, where heavy trucks<sup>5</sup> are regularly parked. The area is also in the vicinity of Fussilet mosque and less than a mile from the Kieler Bridge, where Amri filmed his pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State.<sup>1</sup> Having found a truck to hijack, Amri shot its Polish driver, Lukasz U.,<sup>60</sup> in the head and took control of the vehicle. As subsequent analysis of the truck's GPS system has revealed, Amri practiced driving the vehicle before he left the truck and went over to the Fussilet mosque.<sup>61</sup> He then returned at around 7:30 PM and drove in the direction of *Breitscheidplatz*. On his way, he sent a voice message and a picture from within the truck via the Telegram messaging app to several individuals in Berlin and North Rhine-Westphalia. "*My brother, everything is okay, inshallah. I am inside the vehicle now. Pray for me, my brother, pray for me.*"<sup>62</sup>

At around 8:00 PM, Amri drove the truck into the Christmas market at *Breitscheidplatz*. The truck was stopped by an automatic braking system after it was driven approximately 70 meters through the market, preventing even greater loss of life.<sup>63</sup> Amri escaped on foot and was caught by a CCTV camera at a nearby zoo station where he displays the Tawhid index finger, obviously aware of the cameras. The next trace of Amri surfaced on the afternoon of the next day, when someone—most likely Amri himself<sup>64</sup>—logged into one of Amri's Facebook accounts and deleted it. It is very likely that he went to Emmerich, close to the Dutch border, where he had previously lived and where a witness has claimed to have seen him.<sup>65</sup>

On December 21, CCTV subsequently reviewed by investigators picked him up at train stations in the Dutch town of Nijmegen<sup>u</sup> and then in Amsterdam and Brussels, from where he apparently took a bus to France. On December 22, Amri's 24<sup>th</sup> birthday, he was filmed at Lyon Part-Dieu station, where he bought a ticket to Milan via Chambéry and Turin. At 12:58 AM on December 23, Amri was caught on CCTV exiting Milan's main station. Two hours later, he opened fire on two police officers who, in a random search, asked him for his ID at the suburb station of Sesto San Giovanni. Using the same Erma gun he had used to kill the Polish truck driver, Amri shot one officer in the shoulder before he himself was shot and killed. It remains unclear where he was heading when he left the Sesto San Giovanni station. Seventy-seven hours had elapsed since the attack at *Breitscheidplatz*.<sup>66</sup>

## The Abu Walaa Network

Abu Walaa<sup>67</sup> and four of his alleged accomplices were arrested in Lower Saxony and North Rhine Westphalia on November 8, 2016,<sup>68</sup> about six weeks prior to Amri's attack. Abu Walaa and his alleged aides Ahmed Fifen Youssouf (also known as Abu Faruq), a 27-year-old Cameroonian national, and Mahmoud Omeirat (also known as Abu Samir), a 28-year-old Lebanon-born German,<sup>69</sup> were arrested in Lower Saxony. All three men had been active in a mosque run by "Deutsch-Islamischer Kulturverein e.V." (DIK) in Hildesheim, a town with a population of about 100,000 in Lower Saxony. After

s According to *Die Welt*, police are investigating a witness' claim that a person who looked similar to Amri had tried to steal a truck days before the attack. Florian Flade, "Machte sich Amri Tage vor dem Anschlag an LKW zu schaffen?" *Die Welt*, February 8, 2017.

t Amri did not reveal what or where his target was going to be in the video. "IS veröffentlicht angebliches Video von Amri," RBB, December 23, 2016.

u Nijmegen is around 40km from Emmerich, where Amri lived in a refugee shelter for a time.

2012 when DIK opened the mosque,<sup>70</sup> Hildesheim emerged as one of hotspots of the salafi scene in Germany, and many extremists moved there.<sup>71</sup>

In North Rhine-Westphalia, German police simultaneously arrested two other leading figures in the network. One was Boban Simeonovic (also known as Abu Abdurahman), a 27-year-old Serbian and German national, who holds a degree in chemical engineering and ran the madrasa in Dortmund. The other was Hasan Celenk (also known as Abu Yaha al-Turki), a 51-year-old Turkish national who preached in his travel agency in nearby Duisburg. These two were the leading figures in the Abu Walaa network with whom Amri had repeated contact.<sup>72</sup>

All five individuals were arrested for supporting a foreign terrorist organization<sup>73</sup> and are currently awaiting trial in pre-trial confinement. Investigators believe they were the central figures in a network that recruited people for the Islamic State and facilitated their travel to join the group in Syria.

While the informant "VP01" had provided police in North Rhine-Westphalia with crucial intelligence on the network (and on Amri) since the second half of 2015, German police had apparently held off making arrests for two reasons. One was insufficient evidence caused in part by Abu Walaa's high level of operational security,<sup>v</sup> and the other was protecting the identity of "VP01."<sup>w</sup> It was not until Anil O.—a 22-year-old Turkish-German medical student recruited by the network in Germany in 2015—fled the Islamic State's caliphate in early 2016, voluntarily returned to Germany,<sup>74</sup> and became a key witness against Abu Walaa and his accomplices that German police moved against the network.<sup>x</sup>

Investigators believe the Abu Walaa network had a clear hierarchy with Celenk and Simeonovic appointed as the regional leaders for North Rhine-Westphalia and Abu Walaa<sup>y</sup> acting as the leader

v The claim that there was insufficient evidence was made several times to the author by police and intelligence officials during the summer of 2016.

w The written testimony of the anonymous informant "VP01," who authorities sometimes refer to by the fake name "Murat Yilmaz," would have had less sway in court as compared to the testimony of a person whose identity could be revealed.

x Anil O. grew up in the town of Gelsenkirchen where he achieved outstanding grades in high school. While living there, he came into contact with salafis in 2012. He later distributed Qur'ans as part of the salafi *dawa* project "Lies!" in his hometown of Gelsenkirchen. Anil O. had close contact with Hasan Celenk, had attended Simeonovic's teachings several times, and had also met Abu Walaa, with whom he talked about his *hijra* plans. Anil O. is currently in pre-trial confinement. He was in Syria between August 2015 and January 15, 2016, according to the warrant. After he entered Turkey, he was detained and later released from prison but had to stay in Turkey until his case was resolved. The author, together with his colleague Volkmar Kabisch, first met Anil O. in Turkey after the author was tipped off that "a German doctor" had defected from the Islamic State. This first meeting with Anil O. happened in early March 2016 when the journalists picked him up after he was released from Turkish prison. Excerpts from a (hidden) camera interview with Anil O., which was filmed in July 2016 in Turkey, can be seen at Britta von der Heide, Georg Heil, and Volkmar Kabisch, "Die Terrorschmiede," ARD, November 8, 2016, <http://www.daserste.de/information/reportage-dokumentation/dokus/die-terrorschmiede-100.html>.

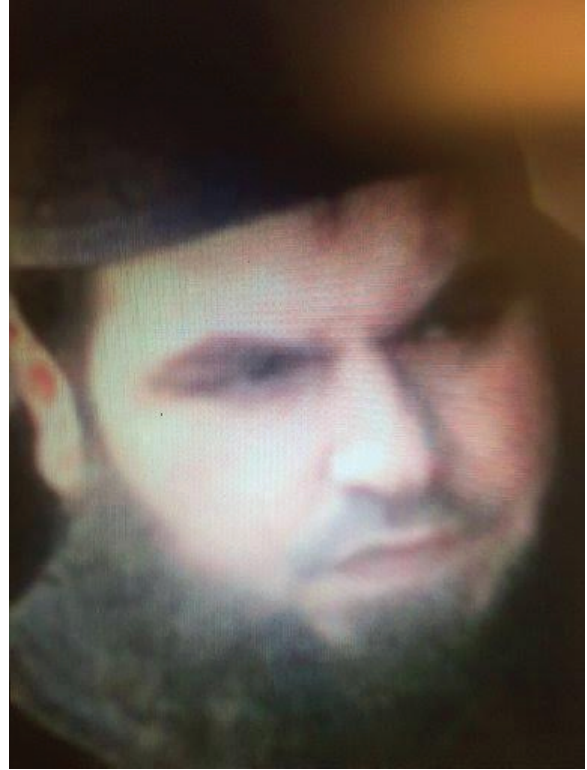
y Celenk was based in Duisburg and Simeonovic in Dortmund, North Rhine-Westphalia, whereas Abdullah, also known as Abu Walaa, had his main base in a mosque in Hildesheim, Lower Saxony. Abu Walaa had an apartment in North Rhine-Westphalia and one in Lower Saxony. He held Islam seminars in different German cities and was also present several times at al-Madina mosque in the city of Kassel in the state of Hesse, close to Hildesheim.

at the federal level of a “nationwide network of salafi-jihadi indoctrinators, which are closely interlinked and act in a work sharing manner.”<sup>75</sup> The German federal public prosecutor accuses Celenk, Simeonovic, and Abdullah of teaching their “students” a common curriculum aimed at preparing them for *hijra* and jihad, which included an Islamic State textbook on theological doctrine published by al-Ghuraba Media.<sup>76</sup> As well as being taught Arabic, students were theologically and ideologically indoctrinated and constantly reminded that it was their duty to join the Islamic State’s caliphate.

According to Anil O., Abu Walaa was the Islamic State’s top representative in Germany,<sup>z</sup> with the ability to approve people for the *hijra* and their entry into Islamic State territory.<sup>aa</sup> Abu Walaa himself had allegedly told Anil O. that he was the only one in Germany who was approved by the Islamic State to make *fatwas*.<sup>77</sup> According to Anil O.’s account, Abu Walaa personally advised him to travel via Brussels and Rhodes to Turkey in order to reach Islamic State territory in Syria. Anil O. also claimed that he was told by Martin Lemke, a German convert from Saxony-Anhalt and a former student of Abu Walaa who now is a senior amniyat (Islamic State intelligence) official in Raqqa,<sup>78</sup> that it was Abu Walaa’s advocacy that resulted in him (Anil O.) being freed from an Islamic State prison when he was arrested on charges of espionage and attempted defection.<sup>ab</sup> Lemke (whose kunya is Nihad Abu Yasir al-Almani) also told Anil O. that he had obtained the position in the amniyat through Abu Walaa, suggesting Abu Walaa had significant clout<sup>ac</sup> with senior Islamic State figures in Raqqa.<sup>79</sup>

Abu Walaa was born in al-Tamin, Iraq, in 1984.<sup>80</sup> According to Anil O., Abu Walaa told him he was an ethnic Kurd.<sup>81</sup> In this regard, it is noteworthy that in a police database under Abu Walaa’s real name Abdullah, there is also a reference to the Kurdish jihadi terror group Ansar al-Islam, though the exact connection remains unclear to the author.<sup>82</sup>

Abu Walaa came to Germany in 2004 and obtained permanent residency in 2008 through marriage.<sup>83</sup> He first appeared in the salafi scene in the state of Hesse, preaching at events held by the Frankfurt-based salafi missionary association Dawa FfM.<sup>84</sup> Another preacher who was active for Dawa Ffm, which was outlawed in 2013, was Abdellatif Rouali.<sup>85</sup> After Abu Walaa’s arrest, Rouali replaced him as a teacher on al-manhaj.de,<sup>8d</sup> an online Qur’anic instruction website closely tied to the Hildesheim mosque and that promoted Abu Walaa’s social media channels.<sup>86</sup>



*Abu Walaa, as identified to the author by a source*

According to Anil O., Abu Walaa told him he had personally been to the caliphate several times in the period after June 2014.<sup>87</sup> German authorities have so far ascertained that Abu Walaa left for Iraq on August 4, 2015—four days before Anil O. himself left Germany—and made a second trip to the country in early 2016. When prior to his arrest Abu Walaa was asked by German police for the reason for his trips, he claimed he wanted to visit relatives in Iraq.<sup>88 ae</sup>

Abu Walaa’s alleged two top deputies, Celenk and Simeonovic, worked closely together, sometimes even holding joint seminars. Simeonovic, described by Anil O. as an “extreme hardliner” and an outspoken supporter of the Islamic State, was the most hardline of the three—accusing Muslims of *takfir* (apostasy) “for not knowing certain things.” Celenk allegedly convinced Anil O. that he would have no future in Germany after he was visited by a special police unit.<sup>89</sup> Celenk mainly preached at his travel agency in Duisburg, where every Monday and Friday his students had to sit on the floor and repeat Qur’anic verses. Celenk stressed the obligation of participating in jihad and made his students watch Islamic State execution and decapitation videos. According to “VPO1,” Simeonovic and Celenk regarded Germany as *darul harb*, a land of war, and repeatedly mentioned that attacks in Germany were justified and sought to encourage them. The informant claimed that both men were supportive when Amri mentioned several times he would seek to commit an attack in Germany.<sup>90</sup> The police informant further reported that one in Celenk’s community had talked about a plan to drive a truck filled with gasoline and loaded with a bomb into a crowd.<sup>91</sup> Anil O. also said there was talk within the Abu Walaa

z In an interview in July 2016 for ARD, Anil O. stated Abu Walaa was the Islamic State’s top representative in Germany. He said he was “the representative” without mentioning “the top” when he spoke to German officials. Von der Heide, Heil, and Kabisch; German Public Prosecutor General of the Federal Court of Justice, case file in the investigation against Hasan Celenk, Boban Simeonovic, and A. Abdulaziz Abdullah.

aa Islamic State registration documents often included details on recommenders. See Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, *The Caliphate’s Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State’s Foreign Fighter Paper Trail* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2016).

ab Anil O. claimed he was tortured and interrogated while he was detained by the Islamic State. Author interview, Anil O., 2016.

ac It is not clear how much of Abu Walaa’s clout in the Islamic State was linked to his pre-existing ties to the group and how much was linked to his acolytes joining the group and moving up its hierarchy.

ad The website is registered in the name Rabih Omeirat in Hildesheim, a relative of Mahmoud Omeirat.

ae German police had also labeled Abu Walaa a *Gefährder*. Author interview, German police official, October 2016.

community about driving trucks into crowds.<sup>92 af</sup>

The number of people the Abu Walaa network recruited for the Islamic State remains unknown. The official case file names 12 male individuals recruited by the network who successfully made the *hijra* and seven who attempted it.<sup>93</sup> Some of these 19 individuals traveled with their wives and children, raising the total.<sup>94</sup> Others who became foreign fighters for the Islamic State, like the twin brothers Kevin and Mark Knop who both died in suicide attacks,<sup>95 ag</sup> were not listed in the case files as being recruited by the network but were nevertheless radicalized by one of its key figures, Hasan Celenk.<sup>96</sup> In the town of Wolfsburg, some 50 miles from Hildesheim, Yassin Oussaifi, a 32-year-old Tunisian citizen who went by the *kunya* Abu Obeida recruited 20 young men (mostly of Tunisian descent) for the Islamic State.<sup>97</sup> Abu Walaa may have played a role in their radicalization. Not only did he hold a seminar in the town and in nearby Gifhorn but he had a “Dejavu – Jeans and more” store in Wolfsburg’s Porschestraße 48,<sup>ah</sup> in close vicinity to where Oussaifi and his followers convened.<sup>98</sup> Oussaifi himself joined the caliphate on May 29, 2014, and worked there as a sharia judge.<sup>99</sup>

Abu Walaa also had a wide presence in the digital sphere.<sup>ai</sup> He was active on al-manhaj.de, and he had a German and an Arabic Facebook profile and a YouTube channel. His supporters even created AbuWalaa apps for Android and iOS devices. His content also appeared on the social media channels of Islamic State members and supporters.<sup>aj</sup> Because he never showed his face in videos, Abu Walaa became known as “the preacher without a face.”

Abu Walaa was careful in other respects. He made sure there were no phones in the room when he talked about sensitive issues. Members of his network used the encryption app Telegram to communicate with each other and jihadis overseas.<sup>100</sup> In his online messages, the Iraqi preacher did not openly express support for the Islamic State but rather used coded language—for example, when he praised “our lions” fighting for Islam. His words were well understood in the salafi scene as supportive of the Islamic State as Claudia

Dantschke, who works in the field of prevention and deradicalization for the NGO Hayat has noted.<sup>101</sup> During his “Islam seminars,” Abu Walaa used more explicit language. “Dawla is our country and the caliph is our caliph ... we have to fight for our land and kill the *kuffar* that attack it,” he allegedly stated at one of the seminars.<sup>102</sup>

Abu Walaa’s main base for his proselytization efforts was the DIK Hildesheim mosque, where he preached regularly on Fridays and had an office. It was from here that he gave money to those who wanted to travel to Syria.<sup>ak</sup> Up to 350 people would regularly show up at Friday prayers in Hildesheim, with intelligence officials estimating that roughly 10 percent of them were so radicalized that they were willing to use violence.<sup>103</sup> In Hildesheim, Abu Walaa was supported by his aides Fifen Youssouf and Omeirat, who, according to the investigations, were responsible for providing recruits with phone numbers of Islamic State contact persons in Turkey.<sup>104</sup>

Fifen Youssouf was considered a close contact of Simeonovic, with the two having studied together at Dortmund University.<sup>105</sup> Later, Fifen Youssouf moved from Hildesheim to Dortmund where he led prayers and allegedly became the “right hand” of Abu Walaa. According to the informant “VPO1,” Fifen Youssouf said he was involved in collecting donations for Islamic State fighters in Syria and Iraq and claimed the community at the DIK mosque in Hildesheim had sent almost €2 million (\$2.1 million) to their “brothers” since the founding of the mosque in 2012.<sup>al</sup> Police in Lower Saxony believe that Fifen Youssouf was involved in burglaries, which were theologically justified by Abu Walaa as *ghanima* (plunder from the infidels).<sup>106</sup> Another way the Abu Walaa network raised funds was to tell those who were about to leave for Syria to sign contracts for mobile phones and tablets. The travelers simply stopped paying the monthly fees and gave the phones to Fifen Youssouf and Omeirat so they could resell them.<sup>am</sup> Anil O. and another alleged member of the network—Yunus S.—were instructed by Abu Walaa to sign contracts for mobile phones for this purpose.<sup>107</sup>

Anil O. said Fifen Youssouf and Omeirat gave him advice on encrypted communication, inconspicuous behavior, and discretion before he left.<sup>108</sup> According to Anil O., the two men also gave him a Turkish cell phone number of an Islamic State trafficker in Turkey, who went by the *kunya* Abu Osman al-Almani and spoke German. They instructed him to contact them from Turkey once he had es-

af According to Anil O.’s testimony, among Simeonovic’s students were Arabic-speaking refugees, including some who had relatives in Islamic State-held territory. Case file in the investigation against Hasan Celenk, Boban Simeonovic, and A. Abdulaziz Abdullah.

ag The brothers were also featured in the Islamic State’s Dabiq magazine, issue 9.

ah Abu Walaa also ran a shop in the town of Braunschweig, close to Wolfsburg, which was registered as a Kleingewerbe, or small business, and closed sometime before June 2016. His shops were also listed in these company databases: <http://www.registrat.de/wolfsburg/herrn-ahmad-abdulaziz-abdullah-handel-mit-textilien-16565488.html>; <http://www.nahklick.de/firmeneintrag/tag/ahmad-abdullah-abdulaziz-dejavue-jeans-more>.

ai As part of his investigative reporting on the Abu Walaa network, the author identified Abu Walaa’s social media accounts. Abu Walaa’s main Facebook account (25,000+ likes) was <https://www.facebook.com/sheikh.abu.walaa/>. He was also connected to the following Facebook accounts: <https://www.facebook.com/Al-manhaj-858491320887671/>; [www.FaceBook.de/AlManhajMedia](http://www.FaceBook.de/AlManhajMedia); [www.FaceBook.de/SheikhAbuWalaa](http://www.FaceBook.de/SheikhAbuWalaa). His YouTube accounts were <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3CfRAh1obhp7gllhUlv6w>; <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCs9d7S7-fPgT6KmmqbfukOA>; and <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8Qz8UQ3-zP6Yluk6kZvIjw> (Arabic). His Telegram accounts were <https://telegram.me/abuwalaa3> and [https://telegram.me/al\\_Manhaj](https://telegram.me/al_Manhaj).

aj These were the NIWELT, BAQIYYA, NASHIR channels for Islamic State members DAWAPICS for supporters. Case file in the investigation against Hasan Celenk, Boban Simeonovic, and A. Abdulaziz Abdullah.

ak According to Anil O., Abu Walaa gave the German aspiring Islamic State recruit Yunus S., among others, 500 Euro to facilitate his travel. Yunus S., from the town of Gelsenkirchen, was part of the so-called “sharia police” that patrolled the streets of Wuppertal for a short time in 2014. Yunus S., a friend of Anil O., was supposed to travel at the same time as Anil O. to Syria through Turkey, but Yunus S. chose to stay in Turkey. Public Prosecutor General of the Federal Court of Justice, case file in the investigation against Hasan Celenk, Boban Simeonovic, and A. Abdulaziz Abdullah.

al The context makes clear he was referring to “brothers” inside Syria and Iraq.

am Anil O. testified that Omeirat and Fifen Youssouf paid him and Yunus S. several hundred Euro for several mobile phones they obtained through the described mobile contracts, thus providing them funds for travel. Anil O. and Yunus S. gave Omeirat and others five iPhones and one MacBook worth €5,000 (\$5,300) prior to their departure, some of which were likely obtained fraudulently. German Public Prosecutor General of the Federal Court of Justice, case file in the investigation against Hasan Celenk, Boban Simeonovic, and A. Abdulaziz Abdullah.

established contact with al-Almani.<sup>an</sup>

Anil O. also said that Omeirat and Fifen Youssef could obtain passports. They had the means to forge (or arrange for others to forge—Anil O. did not clarify) passports.<sup>ao</sup> In another ploy, they used stolen passports or borrowed passports from family members of the person willing to make the *hijra* that would later be sent back to them.<sup>109</sup>

Abu Walaa was also active in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, for instance at Simeonovic's Madrasa Dortmund.<sup>110</sup> The Iraqi preacher was officially registered as living in the state with his first wife and their three children, specifically in the town of Tönisvorst close to Duisburg, where Hasan Celenk resided. While it remains unclear for how long Celenk and Abu Walaa have known each other, it seems possible that their acquaintance dates back prior to the declaration of the caliphate in June 2014 since both men allegedly had already been in contact with the Islamic State's predecessor organization. According to Anil O., Abu Walaa mentioned to him (Anil O.) that he maintained direct and close relations to the Islamic State's "predecessor organisation"<sup>ap</sup> and that he had been previously appointed to his current position as the group's representative in Germany by the predecessor organization. "VP01" reported that Celenk had also himself maintained relations to the Islamic State "predecessor organisation."<sup>111</sup>

The Abu Walaa network was also linked to another attack in Germany. On April 16, 2016, a bomb detonated outside a Sikh temple in the city of Essen, injuring three.<sup>112</sup> The main suspects in the attack, Yusuf T., Mohamed B., and Tolga I., who were all 16 at the time, are currently on trial. Investigators believe that they were part of a group of teenagers<sup>113</sup> who were radicalized by Celenk.<sup>114</sup> At least some of the teenagers had also been to Abu Walaa's mosque in Hildesheim.<sup>115</sup> Anil O.<sup>116</sup> is among the witnesses against the suspected bombers and claimed Yusuf T. had told him as early as November 2014 that he knew Islamic State members.<sup>117</sup>

### Links Between the Network and the Islamic State

The Abu Walaa network in Germany was closely connected to Islamic State operatives inside Syria and Iraq, especially with prominent figures from Germany. As already noted, among these is Lemke, the 26-year-old German national from Zeitz in the state of Saxony-Anhalt, who converted to Islam and later moved to Hildesheim and then left Germany for Syria with at least one wife

and one child in November 2014.<sup>aq</sup>

The fact that Anis Amri was able to upload a video pledging allegiance to the Islamic State before the Berlin attack, which was subsequently broadcasted by the Islamic State, also showed that members of the Abu Walaa network had ways to transmit information to the group.

During a raid in August 2016 at Simeonovic's apartment, police found handwritten notes indicating that he was in direct contact with four German-speaking Islamic State members while they were inside the caliphate in Iraq or Syria. One of them was 32-year-old Ahmad Siala from Hildesheim (also known as Abu Nuh(r)). Siala was the former chairman of the DIK e.V.<sup>118</sup> and a confidant of Abu Walaa.<sup>119</sup>

Another individual apparently in contact with Simeonovic was Silvio Koblitz<sup>120</sup> (also known as Abu Azzam al-Almani and Abu Soumaya al-Almani), who appeared in an Islamic State video in 2014 and threatened to attack Germany.<sup>121</sup> The 29-year-old Koblitz, who is from East Germany and later moved to Essen, was also part of the Millatu Ibrahim movement, a German extremist network supportive of global jihad with a main base in Solingen.<sup>ar</sup> Simeonovic's notes also hinted at direct contact with another prominent figure of Millatu Ibrahim: Austrian national Mohamed Mahmoud<sup>122</sup> (also known as Abu Usama al-Gharib). Mahmoud is one of the most prominent German-speaking figures in the Islamic State, has run a mosque for German speakers in Raqqa,<sup>123</sup> and has allegedly led a German-dominated Islamic State brigade.<sup>124</sup>

The fourth individual Simeonovic was allegedly in touch with was only identified by his *kunya* Abu Qatada,<sup>125</sup> an Islamic State operative who apparently functioned as a warrantor for seven Germans who were about to leave to the caliphate at the time Simeonovic wrote the notes. State criminal police in North Rhine-Westphalia believe (or at least did so in October 2016) that Abu Qatada is Christian Emde, a leading figure in the German-speaking Islamic State propaganda branch and a former member of the Millatu Ibrahim movement. Emde, born in Solingen in 1984, converted to Islam and joined the Islamic State in 2013.<sup>as</sup>

It should be noted that Abu Qatada is also the *kunya* of an ethnic Albanian from Hamburg who was a close friend of Lemke, and research by the author suggests that this may actually have been the individual with whom Simeonovic was in contact.<sup>126</sup> This Albanian

an After Anil O. had reached Antalya in Turkey on a ferry from Rhodes, he traveled to Sanliurfa where he stayed in a safehouse for a week or more, after which he was brought to Gaziantep. He later crossed the border with others close to the Turkish village of Elbeyli. When he saw a Turkish military vehicle, Anil O. thought they would be caught. But then the vehicle's lights were turned off, and they could pass. Anil O. claims he was told by one of the traffickers that the Islamic State had a mole inside the Turkish border guards who would make sure they could cross the border. Author interview, Anil O., March 2016.

ao A source told the author that there was a connection to someone in the Ebu Tejma network in Austria who forged passports.

ap It says predecessor organization, therefore it has to be assumed that it refers to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham. This indicates Abu Walaa had connections to the group before June 2014 when the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, renamed itself the Islamic State and declared the creation of a caliphate. German Public Prosecutor General of the Federal Court of Justice, case file in the investigation against Hasan Celenk, Boban Simeonovic, and A. Abdulaziz Abdullah.

aq A witness informed police he/she had heard that Abu Walaa had given Martin Lemke €2000 for the *hijra* to Syria. German Public Prosecutor General of the Federal Court of Justice, case file in the investigation against Hasan Celenk, Boban Simeonovic, and A. Abdulaziz Abdullah. The biographical detail on Lemke is from an author interview with a German counterterrorism official in the summer of 2016.

ar In examining the links between Millatu Ibrahim and the Abu Walaa network, it is noteworthy that the same year the German Federal Interior Ministry prohibited the Millatu Ibrahim organization in Solingen in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, the DIK mosque opened in Hildesheim, the neighboring state of Lower Saxony. And when Millatu Ibrahim was banned in May 2012, police also raided a store run by Abu Walaa. Author interview, German intelligence official, fall 2016. For more information on Millatu Ibrahim, see Daniel Heinke and Jan Raudszus, "German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *CTC Sentinel* 8:1 (2015).

as Emde is known to a broader audience for the interview he gave to Jürgen Todenhöfer inside the caliphate in Mosul. See <https://vimeo.com/152235972>. The biographical details on Emde are from an author interview with Claudia Dantschke, an Arabist and expert on deradicalization at the NGO Hayat, in February 2017.

is married to Anil O.'s former wife. The Albanian Abu Qatada was a prayer leader in Raqqa who also fought in the brigade of Mohamed Mahmoud and had, according to Anil O., modestly criticized the Islamic State. He was, as a result, confronted by Lemke who told him and Anil O. they would both get executed if they committed any other offense.<sup>127</sup>

In the conversation recalled by Anil O., Lemke allegedly claimed he had talked with then Islamic State propaganda and amniyat chief Abu Mohammad al-Adnani<sup>128</sup> about the case of Abu Qatada.<sup>129</sup> Abu Qatada confirmed to Anil O. that Lemke was the amniyat operative in charge of all Germans within the caliphate. Lemke also told Anil O. that he was appointed to this position thanks to his close ties to Abu Walaa.<sup>130</sup> According to Anil O., Lemke told him that Abu Walaa knew about everything Lemke was doing in the caliphate.<sup>131</sup>

Anil O. also claimed<sup>132</sup> that when he was in Raqqa, he met other Germans, who came from Solingen (the base of the Millatu Ibrahim association) and from Dinslaken, a city in North Rhine-Westphalia from where more than a dozen members of a group known as the Lohberg group,<sup>133</sup> or brigade,<sup>at</sup> (named after a district of Solingen) had traveled to Syria. A member of the group was 43- or 44-year-old Hüseyin Diler, also known as Abu Hanifa, who was close to Paris attacker Abdelhamid Abbaoud and is wanted in connection with the Paris attack.<sup>134</sup> When Anil O. met the Germans, he was asked by one of them what acquaintances he had in militant circles in Germany. When he named Hasan Celenk, the individual contacted Celenk via Telegram and Celenk confirmed that he knew and trusted Anil O.<sup>135</sup> According to the official file, Celenk was also aware that Anil O. had left Mosul and suspected he had even left the caliphate, which also indicates that he was in close contact with people inside the caliphate. Celenk had also organized at least one bus trip from Dinslaken to the Hildesheim mosque.<sup>136</sup>

These were not the only links between Abu Walaa network and the Islamic State. In traveling to join the group, Anil O. claimed that he was picked up in the vicinity of al-Ra'i on the Syrian side of the Turkey-Syria border by Bali Ilhami (also known as Ebu Bekir al-Turki), a Turkish national of Kurdish ethnicity who allegedly fought with the Taliban before entering Syria. Ilhami told Anil O. that the brothers in Germany had informed him that Anil O. would come and that he personally knew Celenk and Abu Walaa. Ilhami also said that Abu Walaa was a longtime supporter of the Islamic State and had been to Islamic State territory several times.<sup>137</sup>

Islamic State operatives in Syria were aware of the aspirations of at least one member of the Abu Walaa network to carry out an attack. Omeirat had in 2015, according to Anil O., talked about committing attacks on police officers with silenced handguns in Germany and had claimed he had weapons and a silencer. It seems clear that Abu Walaa knew of the alleged attack plans since Anil O. testified he was told by Lemke that he (Lemke) was informed about this plan by Abu Walaa.<sup>138</sup>

What triggered Omeirat's desire to attack was a run-in between members of the network and German security services. When Anil O. was approached by a special police unit on July 7, 2015, and served an official document prohibiting him from leaving Germany,

at A member of the Lohberg group, Nils D., who returned to Germany and was convicted, was a member of a special unit in the caliphate that hunted defectors. See Lena Kampf and Georg Mascolo, "Deutsche foltern für den Geheimdienst des IS," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, October 20, 2015.

he resisted and was injured, while his friend Yunus S. surrendered. Yunus S.'s pregnant wife and Anil O.'s wife were also at the scene. Shortly after the incident, when Anil O. was in Hildesheim, Omeirat told him in the cellar of the mosque that he would take revenge for the police action, according to Anil O.'s account.<sup>au</sup>

In yet another connection between the Abu Walaa network and the Islamic State, when Anil O. was imprisoned in the caliphate on charges of espionage and attempted defection, a Syrian *qadi* (Islamic State judge) known as Sheikh Hassan who spoke a little German, asked him who sent him to Syria. When Anil O. replied his recruiter was Abu Walaa, Sheikh Hassan said he knew him. Sheikh Hassan also told Anil O. that he had been to Aachen, where Anil had studied medicine prior to his departure.<sup>139</sup>

## The Future Threat

The case of Anis Amri and the Abu Walaa network has grave implications for the security of Germany and Europe. It shows an interconnectedness between Islamist extremists inside Germany and individuals within the Islamic State who are, in some cases like Lemke, closely connected to the group's leadership. They were sharing information in real time, coordinating on security-related issues and the logistics for *hijra*, and in at least one instance communicating on attack plans.

The remaining parts of the Abu Walaa network could still pose a threat. In the Hildesheim mosque community, there are individuals still proselytizing who were very close to Abu Walaa and were possibly involved in the activities of the network. Investigators believe there were more people involved in the recruitment of individuals and the logistics of sending them to Syria than the five arrested.<sup>140</sup> With groups like the Abu Walaa network, there appears to be organizational memory that persists even after leading figures are arrested. History shows that banned organizations like Millatu Ibrahim or Dawa FfM were replaced by similar associations with other figures rising up to fill leadership gaps.<sup>av</sup> The Abu Walaa network itself was at least loosely connected to similar networks in Austria and Turkey<sup>141</sup> and possibly elsewhere, which had created a logistical and recruitment pipeline over thousands of miles between Germany and Syria. This interconnectedness provided and likely continues to provide what would otherwise be only groups aligned with the Islamic State and acting independently the ability to pool know-how and resources, making them significantly more effective and dangerous.

The interconnectedness between the Abu Walaa network, other extremist networks in Germany, and the Islamic State provides the latter with a support network in Germany that is familiar with the country and its culture, law, and language. This could provide assistance to any attack cells the Islamic State has dispatched or might

au Part of the approach by the special police unit was filmed and was viewed by the author at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_vTNlbpMROk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_vTNlbpMROk). German Public Prosecutor General of the Federal Court of Justice, case file in the investigation against Hasan Celenk, Boban Simeonovic, and A. Abdulaziz Abdullah. Yunus S. is now believed to be in Turkey and part of the salafi scene there. Author interview, source, February 2017.

av The DIK association seems to have learned from the ban of similar groups. According to the registry, it has sold the mosque to a member of the mosque's community on the condition that the DIK could use it. As the mosque is now owned by a private individual, it cannot be seized by the state.

dispatch to the country. Online encryption messaging platforms such as Telegram have allowed Islamic State operatives in caliphate territory to keep in touch with recruiters and guide plotters in Europe. Celenk and Simeonovic used Telegram to communicate with Islamic State members in Syria,<sup>aw</sup> and Amri used Telegram to communicate with Islamic State operatives in Libya, as well as other members<sup>ax</sup> of the network in Germany.

The presence in Europe of die-hard supporters of the Islamic State like Simeonovic with significant influence over young men, ongoing communication with Raqqa, and a deep commitment to launch attacks on European soil only makes the threat more severe.

While the attack on the Sikh temple in Essen was committed by teenagers linked to and inspired by the Abu Walaa network, almost every other Islamic State-linked terror attack in Germany in 2016—the knife attack on a police officer in Hannover by a then 15-year-old girl in February, the knife and axe attack inside a train close to Würzburg in July by a refugee, the bomb attack in Ansbach in July by a refugee, and the foiled bomb attack by Syrian refugee Jaber al-Bakr<sup>142</sup>—were remotely guided from outside Germany.<sup>143</sup>

aw Anil O. claimed that German foreign fighters contacted Celenk via Telegram, according to the case file. Simeonovic used Telegram, according to an intelligence official. Author interview, German intelligence official, February 2017; German Public Prosecutor General of the Federal Court of Justice, case file in the investigation against Hasan Celenk, Boban Simeonovic, and A. Abdulaziz Abdullah.

ax The informant VPO1 said he communicated with Amri by Telegram messenger. German Public Prosecutor General of the Federal Court of Justice, case file in the investigation against Hasan Celenk, Boban Simeonovic, and A. Abdulaziz Abdullah.

Such remote control guidance was also possibly a feature of Amri's attack, given his suspected communications with Islamic State operatives inside Libya.<sup>144</sup>

The case of Amri shows how difficult it is to predict which individuals will switch from radical rhetoric to radical action and how difficult it is to judge when individuals have shed their radical views. Amri dealt drugs and consumed them, a fact that appears to have led German police to mistakenly conclude that he no longer posed a threat. Amri's case also shows how difficult it is for German authorities to verify identities of asylum seekers.

The information that has emerged on the Abu Walaa network's activities in and around a few towns in northwestern Germany, just like the Khalid al-Zerkani network in Brussels and similar networks elsewhere, shows the pernicious and outsize influence of just a few radical preachers and the networks that surround them can have in recruitment for the Islamic State. It seems unclear how similar networks will act now that the *hijra* to Syria becomes more and more difficult, but it seems that the threat for Germany and Europe will not grow smaller because of this reality. Amri's contact to Libya shows that there is no necessity to communicate with Syria since Islamic State operatives are spread around many countries.

The case also underlined the high level of operational security maintained by radical networks in Europe, with the Abu Walaa network using encrypted communications and other security protocols.

It took a long time for the leaders of the Abu Walaa network to be arrested as police had to rely on an Islamic State defector to get the necessary proof for arrest warrants. The Berlin attack demonstrated time is not on their side. **CTC**

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# A View from the CT Foxhole: General John W. Nicholson, Commander, Resolute Support and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan

By Brian Dodwell and Don Rassler

*General John W. Nicholson, USMA '82, serves as the Commander, Resolute Support and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan. During his 33-year career, he has commanded at every level, and led or served within NATO four times. He previously commanded NATO Allied Land Command, the 82nd Airborne Division, and was Director of the Pakistan Afghanistan Coordination Cell on the Joint Staff. In Afghanistan, he served as Deputy Commanding General for Operations of U.S. Forces Afghanistan and Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations of NATO's International Security Assistance Forces, and Deputy Commander of Regional Command South. He also commanded 3rd BCT (TF Spartan) of the 10th Mountain Division, the only U.S. BCT in Afghanistan in 2006, conducting counterinsurgency operations along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.*

**CTC:** Given the current focus on the Islamic State in the Levant region, can you talk a little bit about why Afghanistan, and particularly the counterterrorism mission, is still relevant? What impacts has this focus on Iraq and Syria had on your efforts in South Asia, positive and/or negative?

**Nicholson:** The reason Afghanistan remains important is the concentration of terrorist groups in the Afghanistan/Pakistan (AF/PAK) region. Of the 98 U.S. designated terrorist groups globally, 20 are in the AF/PAK region. This is the highest concentration anywhere in the world. So even though in other places, some of these particular groups may have more members—ISIS is a perfect example—many terror groups are still active in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The particular danger this presents is the convergence of these groups. Because these groups exist in this medium of a high-youth population, low employment, the presence of narcotics and other criminal enterprises, the extremist teachings in some of the religious schools, it creates kind of a petri dish within which these different strains of terrorism—the 20 designated groups and three VEOs [violent extremist organizations]—all converge, recruit, and morph into more virulent strains. Our presence keeps pressure on that system. That's critical to prevent another attack on our homeland or our allies.

Certainly there's been a great focus on the ISIL-Main presence, but they've created eight affiliates, and ISIS-K [Islamic State in the Khorasan Province] is one of them. So as we continue to pressure the center, we don't want to see fighters and resources move to our theater. We have been conducting a series of operations against ISIS-K on a regular basis since the beginning of 2016 and have succeeded in reducing their number of fighters almost in half and their territory by two-thirds. We've killed their top 14 leaders. Now, obviously, they regenerate, and there still are existing financial networks that link ISIL-Main to ISIS-K. There's information support. There's guidance. There's still active communication back and forth

between ISIS-K and ISIL-Main.

**CTC:** You mentioned 20 designated foreign terrorist organizations in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region. Diversity of agenda is really complicated in the militant environment. Which organizations are you the most concerned about and why?

**Nicholson:** The top two organizations we're concerned about are al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. These two have transnational ambitions. They have ambitions against the U.S. homeland and the homelands of our allies. So that's why they're at the top of the list. The others obviously concern us as well. Many of them have regional ambitions. For example, al-Qa`ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) attacks regionally. The Haqqani network goes back and forth. We have the IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] Quds Forces operating inside Afghanistan, supporting the Taliban. Many of these groups are based in Pakistan, and then some of them fight in Afghanistan. Jaish-e-Mohammed, Lashkar-e-Taiba—we find these operatives showing up in Afghanistan, and so this is the convergence.

Let me give you an example. Al-Qa`ida is linked to the Taliban, who are not a designated terrorist organization but a violent extremist organization, and the Taliban provide a medium for designated terrorist organizations like the Haqqani network, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and AQIS. These five form a loose sort of confederation that complement one another and work together. The Islamic State, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have also formed a loose configuration. So we see these alliances of convenience or where they have complementary goals come together, and this is one of our big concerns.

U.S. policy in the region is to maintain a regional counterterrorism platform. I believe the policy is very, very sound and very important because having a regional counterterrorism platform—we call that CASA CT (Central Asia South Asia Counterterrorism)—keeps pressure on these groups. We do a lot of work with our neighbors. I've been to India three times. I go to Pakistan monthly. The Central Asian republics are very concerned about the spillover. We find external actors like the Russians promoting a narrative, a false narrative, that the Afghan government is not effective against ISIS-K, therefore the Russians are legitimizing the Taliban as being the most effective against ISIS-K. They use this as an opportunity to undermine the U.S. and NATO. Iran is supporting the Taliban, particularly in the western part of Afghanistan, and the Quds Force, IRGC, is working with the Taliban. There's also a nexus with criminal organizations through which the Taliban get most of their funding. Almost two-thirds of their funding [comes] from the opium trade, illegal mining, extortion, kidnapping, et cetera. So what you find is this kind of toxic mixture of terrorist, insurgent, criminal activity operating in this medium. The huge youth bulge—210 million people between Pakistan and Afghanistan—probably two-thirds

are under the age of 30; and economic development is not keeping up with the demographic growth—you add in the extremist teachings in the madrassas, and you've got a very toxic mixture.

As the commander of U.S. Forces Afghanistan, I control the CT effort. And as the commander of Resolute Support, I do the training, advising, and assisting of the Afghans to include their CT forces, which are the most effective in their military. In the U.S. CT effort this year, of the 20 groups, we've killed five emirs of these groups in the last nine months. So we've had a fairly effective CT effort going on. However, as we know, they regenerate quickly and produce new leaders. On October 23, we killed Farooq al-Qa`ida and was actively involved in the last year in plotting attacks against the United States. There's active plotting against our homeland going on in Afghanistan. If we relieve pressure on this system, then they're going to be able to advance their work more quickly than they would otherwise.

**CTC: Can you speak about the relationship between AQIS and AQ senior leadership? Obviously AQIS is more regionally focused, but can you speak about how you assess the threat that part of the organization poses?**

**Nicholson:** A good example would be the raid that we conducted in October of 2015 in Shorabak District of Kandahar, which uncovered a camp where AQIS and Taliban were working together. AQIS had a fairly sophisticated media effort. There was a lot of exploitable material that came off of that objective, and that material revealed just how sophisticated these folks are. Yes, they have a regional agenda, but this region is very important to the United States. With our growing relationship with India, we're concerned about the instability in Bangladesh, and we've seen a lot of AQIS interference in Bangladesh. In this Shorabak objective, there were congratulatory notes going back and forth about some of these activities in Bangladesh. There is a linkage to core al-Qa`ida. Of course, al-Qa`ida is very focused right now on the survival of their senior leadership, but they are connected to these guys as well. They all share the same agenda and the same focus.

With AQIS, in return for the sanctuary and support they get from groups like the Taliban, they do lend assistance to the Taliban. They're lending expertise to the people that we're concerned about inside of Afghanistan. This is back to that convergence factor that we're very concerned about inside Afghanistan. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

**CTC: When you say convergence, do you include the possibility of a convergence between those two different conglomerations that you talked about? Do you see that maybe as ISIS-K gets reduced in its capability, these networks (ISIS-K and the Taliban) could potentially come back together again in the future?**

**Nicholson:** I don't see those two groupings coming together. Haibatullah<sup>a</sup> has made statements telling the Taliban to attack the Islamic State. Al-Baghdadi's rhetoric is pretty clear. So we don't see some sort of accommodation between the Taliban and Islamic



*GEN Nicholson at a security shura with the head of Kandahar Provincial Council*

State. What we do see are more radicalized elements of other groups ready to join the Islamic State for two reasons: one, they may agree with the ideology; or two, the money. There's direct financial support flowing from Syria to Afghanistan. An Islamic State fighter is paid almost twice as much as a Taliban fighter.

In some cases, in southern Nangarhar Province, for example, this has meant they've been able to recruit local Taliban fighters who live in the area and are faced with a tough choice: *Do I move away from my home, or do I just join these guys?* Some of them join. But the vast majority of Afghans reject Islamic State, and most of the Islamic State fighters in Afghanistan are from the Orakzai Agency of Pakistan.<sup>b</sup> They're actually TTP; they're Pakistanis. So they're viewed as foreigners.

**CTC: Have you seen that pay issue change over time? There's been discussion, in Iraq and Syria, as the Islamic State has been under increased military pressure there that they have not been able to pay their fighters as much in that location. How has that flow of funding and even the overall support to Khorasan changed as the caliphate has been constricted?**

**Nicholson:** That's a good point. They have had some financial difficulties, but there's still money getting through. It's a big focus of our effort. My intention would be to defeat Islamic State in Afghanistan in the next year. I'm setting the bar high for us. Money is flowing today. We don't want fighters flowing tomorrow.

**CTC: And you do not see fighters flowing right now?**

**Nicholson:** No, we do not. We see operational guidance. They receive funding. Dabiq magazine<sup>c</sup> had an issue where they highlighted ISIS-K, so they do get that support. We've been striking them and eliminating people, but they are adapting. We have reduced their financial flows, but we haven't eliminated them.

**CTC: You've spoken about the sophistication of many of these**

a Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada has been the leader of the Taliban since May 2016.

b Orakzai Agency is an agency in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan.

c Dabiq magazine is the Islamic State's propaganda magazine.

different groups, whether it's AQIS or al-Qa`ida in the north-east, as well as our concerns about collaboration. There's been a lot of innovative use of weapons and technology in the Levant with core Islamic State. We talked about the sharing of financial resources between ISIL and ISIS-K—how concerned are you about the sharing of tactical, technical know-how from the Levant to the AF/PAK region?

**Nicholson:** I am concerned about it. Let me mention three examples. One would be the use of UASs [Unmanned Aerial Systems]. We're seeing an increase in UAS activity in Afghanistan. I wouldn't link that just to ISIL. It's across the board. The Taliban's doing it. They filmed an attack in Helmand, for example. So we see reconnaissance being conducted by these means. Second, I'd mention the sophistication of their suicide attacks. We *are* seeing, within ISIS-K, a fairly sophisticated ability to conduct suicide attacks.

The third I would mention is the targeting of Shi`a. This carries over from ISIL. This is a concern that doesn't get a lot of play, but we're concerned about it because we have a Shi`a minority in Afghanistan. The Iranians are recruiting from the Shi`a minority to fight ISIL in Syria, and now ISIS-K in Afghanistan are attacking the Shi`a. I see this as clearly connected. What happens if and when these Shi`a fighters return to Afghanistan? The ISIS-K attacks on the Shi`a also create a political problem for [Afghan] President [Ashraf] Ghani. Generally speaking, the Shi`a areas of Afghanistan are relatively stable because they reject the Taliban and extremists. But now they are being targeted by ISIS-K, so this is creating a security issue and a political issue for the Afghan government. The Shi`a minority are demanding greater protection from the government. If they don't protect them or if these attacks continue, the government's inability to protect the Shi`a minority will become more and more of a political issue in terms of support for the national unity government.

**CTC:** When it comes to our counterterrorism mission, we've been in Afghanistan for a long time. We've become exceptionally skilled at removing the "players"—the individuals and groups—of the insurgency, which can change and be replaced. What else do you think the United States could do to get after the "league," whether that's the ideological, financial, or other logistical infrastructure that helps to, over time, to sustain the insurgency and just refill the ranks?

**Nicholson:** I think we're playing multidimensional chess. We're not playing on just one board; we're playing on multiple boards. And some of the boards we're not showing up on. We're not taking on the ideology as effectively as we need to. You mentioned financial. Financial is extremely important with not just ISIL but anybody—such as the Taliban profiting from the narcotics trades, the illegal mining, or taxing locals. Without that financial support, they can't conduct these operations.

We've got to be more sophisticated and effective in how we go after these networks because simply killing fighters and removing them from the field isn't enough, they can be regenerated because of these underlying conditions I mentioned. Some of those are things we can do locally, but most are more AOR<sup>d</sup>-wide. CENTCOM and

**“We're playing multidimensional chess. We're not playing on just one board; we're playing on multiple boards. And some of the boards we're not showing up on. We're not taking on the ideology as effectively as we need to.”**

SOCOM are very focused on that. We work very closely with them on these issues. They have specific teams looking at these issues that we work with. Financial flows from Syria to Afghanistan, it's not us tracking those. We're tapping into a larger enterprise effort to interdict that. So that's extremely important.

Part of the reason the Haqqanis are effective is their business enterprises, to include significant enterprises in the Gulf and elsewhere that fund their operations. So, this enables them to be a corrupting influence on various governments. I think the financial piece in particular and the ideological are the two we've got to get after.

**CTC:** One topic that has come up in the news recently is the idea of safe zones in Afghanistan. What is your reaction to this idea?

**Nicholson:** Reconciliation is the end state we're after. The classic approach is you militarily incentivize them to reconcile. Of course, the problem with that is they enjoy sanctuary inside Pakistan. So whenever the pressure gets too great, they just move back across the border. This is why an insurgency that enjoys external sanctuary and support is seldom defeated expeditiously. But the casualties have been so high for both the Taliban as well as the Afghans that the Afghan people are saying to the enemy, *You're not fighting Westerners. You're not fighting crusaders. You're killing Muslims. And we're killing Muslims. What are we doing?*

The specific notion of a safe zone emerged from a peace *jirga*<sup>e</sup> that was held in Kandahar in the last few weeks that was widely attended from representatives from across the Pashtu community, the south, the east, and the west, about a thousand of them. It was a non-governmental meeting, and out of it, there was an outreach to the Taliban. Despite the public pronouncements you see from the Taliban that they're unwilling to reconcile, there's a conversation going on inside the Taliban about this. They're at a bit of a stalemate. The government holds about two-thirds of the population. The enemy holds a solid 8 to 10 percent. And the rest they're fighting over.

I think [Abdul] Raziq, the police commander in Kandahar, mentioned this idea of a safe zone, and the idea was if you're willing to come back, we'll create a safe environment for you. We'll create a safe zone for you to come back with your families. We're fully in support of that. We want to see reconciliation. This year, we had the HIG [Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin] reconcile. The next step is to successfully reintegrate them. And that'll be harder, but 20,000 fighters and families will move back into Afghanistan this

d Area of Responsibility

e A *jirga* is a non-governmental council of Afghan tribal leaders.

year, primarily in the Nangarhar/Kabul area, beginning with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar himself. This reintegration will be a significant test for the Afghan government, but it could also serve as a catalyst to demonstrate to the Taliban what's possible.

Now, I don't think it'll lead to some grand bargain with the Taliban. What form I think it might take is what Ghani calls "fight, fracture, talk." We go at them hard. They go at us hard. Then we start peeling people off. The HIG this year, the IEHC, or Islamic Emirate High Council, was another group, and then this peace *jirga* starts to create fissures. Then we start to get leaders coming in. Over time, you'll gradually erode them—horizontally, vertically, a fracture, a peel-off. The national campaign plan spans five years and calls for reconciliation. With the roadmap, we're working with Ghani on how to improve the effectiveness of their forces to bring more pressure to bear to expand the amount of population controlled by the Afghans. We think [if] we get to about 80 percent or more, we start to reach a tipping point where the insurgency becomes more irrelevant. If they're relegated to less than 10 percent of the population and the government's at 80, it looks kind of like other countries that have successfully fought insurgencies. That's not a bad outcome. Then we get to a point where that's sustainable over time.

**CTC:** [Now former] Defense Secretary Ashton Carter has identified the United States' primary goal in Afghanistan as being the prevention of an attack ever again arising from Afghan territory. You have identified the Afghan government's goal as being reconciliation with enough of the belligerents that the remainder can be managed by Afghan security forces. Much of the public focus seems to be on the latter, and the struggles we and the Afghans have experienced in achieving it over the past 15 years. Can the former be achieved without the latter, or are they inextricably linked? Must reconciliation be achieved for U.S. security from attack to be assured?

**Nicholson:** Well, I'd say we are achieving the former without the latter right now. But there's a higher cost associated with it. I think it comes down to cost. The issue is if they view this as a sort of insurance policy where you're trying to prevent an attack on the homeland and you're paying a certain amount of money and investing a certain level of lives and funding to sustain it, is that worth it?

If you look at the cost of a 9/11, depending on how you calculate it, it was anywhere from \$2 to \$4 trillion, if you count the cost of the wars. And then what are we paying every year in Afghanistan? It's obviously a fraction of that. Is that worth it? The Chairman [of the Joint Chiefs of Staff] would say, it's term life insurance. If you reduce the investment, the risk goes up. I tend to agree with that analogy.

Game changers to that equation would be reconciliation. Also a change in Pakistan's behavior—if Pakistan no longer allows sanctuary and enablement to these organizations—that would make it much harder for them to operate. There are some independent vari-

ables that could make a difference. I've identified these as kind of non-security, civil factors that affect the level of investment we need to make. These include demographics, economic development, counter-narcotics, reconciliation, and corruption. Then the things that could cause the Afghans to fail include casualties, the stability of the government, the convergence of these terrorist organizations, and the role of external actors. As I've articulated this to the administration, it's been in those terms, saying to prevent failure, you've got to mitigate against those factors. To succeed long-term, it's not purely military. You have to invest in these other areas. So then the question is, "Is it worth it?" That's a policy decision. I certainly think it is.

Then there are some intangibles that are hard to place. We have a willing partner in a tough neighborhood. The Afghans want us there. We work in close cooperation with their national director of security, their judiciary, their military, their CT forces. This is a very cooperative environment. Compare that to what's going on Iraq right now. In Afghanistan, they want us there. In fact, they want more advisors. Afghanistan is important geostrategically. It's important because of the number of terrorist groups. It's important because we have a willing partner there in the Afghans. So for all those reasons, then you get into the investment level.

**CTC:** Can you explain further the interaction between the advising part of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan and our CT efforts there?

**Nicholson:** In my view, the train, advise, assist piece enables the CT. The two missions are complementary. This train, advise, assist part of the operation is a critical enabler to having a CT operation because with the forces we use, the Afghan forces, all of the operations we go on are partnered or enabled. The Afghans are on them. I have the authority to go unilateral against certain groups, but we seldom do, except if it's a strike, an airstrike. But on the ground, it's Afghans with advisors doing these operations. So this training, advising, assisting investment with their military is essential to having a viable CT platform.

My view is you can look at this as a prototype for what a regional CT platform looks like and where else you might want them globally. In my view, even with this CASA CT platform in Afghanistan—critical region of the world, 20 terrorist groups—you have to do the train, advise, and assist. And there are allies who are willing to come in and play that role. In this case, we currently have 39 nations doing train, advise, assist; it's much more politically acceptable domestically for these nations to come in and do train, advise, and assist. And it actually helps us enormously. So I think there's a formula that we ought to take a look at for how we might do this elsewhere. We have the coalition of nations against ISIL in Iraq and Syria, but we don't have the host nation in Syria. So we may end up with different models in different places. But I would recommend looking at the train, advise, assist part of this mission and how it enables the effectiveness of the CT platform. **CTC**

# The Formation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Wider Tensions in the Syrian Insurgency

By Aymenn al-Tamimi

**Late January 2017 saw a significant realignment of rebel and jihadi factions in Syria. Following aggressive moves by al-Qa`ida-aligned Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, a number of rebel groups sought protection under Ahrar al-Sham. In response, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and its main allies announced the formation of a new umbrella group, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, headed by the leader of a hardline former faction of Ahrar al-Sham. If the lines between the two blocs harden, a confrontation between them could further weaken the rebel position in Syria.**

**T**he rapid recapture of east Aleppo by the Assad regime and its allies in the first half of December 2016 constituted a major blow for the Syrian insurgency. In effect, the regime now has firm control over the two largest urban conurbations in the country (namely, Damascus and Aleppo). While areas of insurgent activity remain in some suburbs to the east and south of Damascus, these pockets do not pose a real threat to the regime and could well be removed over the course of this year. While the regime now stands on much firmer ground politically, it still makes very clear its intentions to reconquer the entirety of Syria, and there is little doubt that it will continue to pursue this goal, whatever notions of a political settlement are discussed at foreign venues.

Therefore, there is a very real possibility of a regime advance into the most important remaining insurgent stronghold of Idlib province in the northwest of Syria, from which the regime was almost completely driven out in the spring of 2015. This threat, combined with ongoing soul-searching within rebel and jihadi groups on how the defense of east Aleppo collapsed so quickly, helped give renewed energy to preexisting discussions on mergers between various factions within the Syrian rebellion.

Thus, two main merger schemes took form over the course of December 2016 in northern Syria. One reflected a continuation of al-Qa`ida-guided rebranding efforts that saw the renaming of Jabhat al-Nusra to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham at the end of July 2016, with the ostensible dropping of links between this new entity and al-Qa`ida.<sup>1</sup> The purpose was to integrate Jabhat Fateh al-Sham more deeply into the wider Syrian insurgency by establishing a larger coalition to realize an Islamic emirate or government of some

kind, something that would necessarily entail merger talks with other factions. The other merger scheme was proposed in late December by insurgent factions in the north whose statement featured the brand of the "Free Syrian Army" and spoke of unity in vague terms.<sup>a</sup>

For any merger scheme to become dominant in the north of Syria, one cannot ignore the incorporation of the large faction Ahrar al-Sham, which has straddled a nebulous line between a more mainstream nationalist vision of Syria's future and the salafi-jihadi component of the insurgency. Enjoying strong backing from Turkey and Qatar, the movement also has elements that have sought to push the group closer to the salafi-jihadi factions. From the perspective of Ahrar al-Sham, walking this tenuous line creates the risk of fragmentation as rival merger schemes compete to win over the group. Within Ahrar al-Sham itself, a sub-coalition formed in December 2016 under the name of Jaysh al-Ahrar and was led by Hashim al-Sheikh (Abu Jaber),<sup>b</sup> who characterized the sub-group as reformist in nature.<sup>c</sup>

A variety of rationales can be suggested for the formation of

a A copy of the original statement, dated December 28, 2016, can be found at <https://justpaste.it/fsastatement28dec2016>. The signatories in full were Jaysh al-Islam's northern affiliates, Jabhat Ahl al-Sham, Liwa Shuhada' al-Islam from Darayya, Liwa al-Furqan I Idlib, Suqur al-Sham, the Shami Front, al-Fawj al-Awal, Faylaq al-Sham, Farqat al-Safwa, and Ahrar al-Sharqiya.

b A biography of Hashim al-Sheikh titled "Sheikh Hashim" was posted by Al Jazeera on September 10, 2014. According to this account, he was born in Maskanah in the east Aleppo countryside in 1968 and fought in Iraq against U.S.-led coalition forces following the 2003 invasion. He was then arrested in 2005, eventually ending up in the notorious Saydnaya prison, but was released in 2011 as part of an amnesty that saw many Islamist and jihadi prisoners released. He formed a local battalion in Maskanah that joined Ahrar al-Sham in 2013. Following a mysterious bomb attack in September 2014 that wiped out many of Ahrar al-Sham's first generation of leaders (including the overall leader Hassan Aboud), he was appointed leader of Ahrar al-Sham before being replaced in September 2015 by Abu Ammar (real name: Ali al-Omar), who remains overall leader of Ahrar al-Sham to this day.

c A copy of the original statement, dated December 10, 2016, can be found at <https://justpaste.it/jayshahraroriginalstatement>. The signatories in full were Liwa al-Tamkeen, Liwa Omar al-Farouq, Liwa Ahrar al-Jabal al-Wustani, Liwa Ajnad al-Shari'a, Liwa Ansar al-Sahel, Liwa Ansar Homs, Katibat Abu Talha al-Ansari, the Kurdish Wing, Katibat Hamza bin Abd al-Mutta'ib, Katibat Qawafil al-Shuhada', Katibat Ahrar Harim, Katibat Sheikh al-Islam, Katibat al-Tawaqim, Liwa al-Madfa'ia wa al-Sawarikh, Liwa al-Madfa'ia al-Radif, and Liwa al-Mudar'at.

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*Hashim al-Sheikh (Abu Jaber) makes his first appearance as General Commander of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in a video released on February 9, 2017.*

Jaysh al-Ahrar,<sup>d</sup> but the foremost reason for its emergence was to pressure Ahrar al-Sham to merge with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham in some way. Conversely, other elements of Ahrar al-Sham were pushing back against the merger, knowing that formally uniting with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham would lead to isolation from the group's foreign backers,<sup>e</sup> especially Turkey. Since launching operations in north Aleppo countryside under the 'Euphrates Shield' moniker in late August 2016 (countering both the Islamic State and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces) and since the retaking of Aleppo city by the regime, Turkey's insistence on Assad's departure has become less and less vocal. Turkey has also been working with Russia to secure its interests in northern Syria, with the latter even providing some air support for Euphrates Shield.<sup>2</sup> Ahrar al-Sham has been participating in Euphrates Shield as well,<sup>f</sup> clearly to the chagrin of those who came under Jaysh al-Ahrar and wanted closer relations with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.

These contrary impulses within Ahrar al-Sham could perhaps

be seen as the main reason why a merger involving Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham did not materialize, even as the more 'revolutionary/nationally' oriented merger initiative also failed to show anything impressive.<sup>8</sup> Yet the exact process by which the merger talks involving Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham failed is a matter of dispute, and with a lack of truly independent observers at those talks, determining the truth of what happened will likely remain a murky issue. What is clear, however, is that there was a proposal for Jabhat Fateh al-Sham's leader, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, to adopt a military leadership role as part of this merger.<sup>3</sup>

Alongside the failure of these merger talks, two other key developments contributed to a rise in intra-rebel tensions in early 2017. Firstly, U.S. airstrikes continued targeting Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and were clearly escalating in intensity in the final days of the Obama administration. The likely intent behind these strikes, identified astutely by the likes of former Ahrar al-Sham emir Hashim al-Sheikh,<sup>4</sup> was to isolate Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and try to signal to other factions that a merger with the group would entail the same deadly consequences. This approach was foremost represented in a strike that targeted a training camp being used by both Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and the Islamist group Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki.<sup>5</sup> The relative lack of condolences issued by other factions for the large-scale losses suffered aroused suspicion and outrage. For example, Sheikh Abdullah al-Muheisseni, a Saudi jihadi cleric who has since joined Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, complained on his Telegram channel: "Has factionalism really afflicted us to the point that 100 martyrs should be martyred at the hands of the coalition, then we do not hear a statement of condolences?! God is our reliance and He is the best trustee. Then they say: Oh mashaykh, intervene to reduce the congestion in the field!"<sup>6</sup>

The second key development was the attempt by Russia and Turkey to integrate insurgent factions into the talks held in Astana, Kazakhstan, from late January with a view to enforcing a ceasefire agreement the two countries had worked out. The Astana talks had been preceded by low-profile discussions sponsored by Turkey that aimed to set up a third-way alternative to the two merger initiatives, resulting in a tentative agreement to set up a body called the Syria Liberation Command Council. This council would not constitute a merger but rather set up joint military and political committees.<sup>7</sup> This agreement, which was leaked to the media, featured signatories from major insurgent factions, including Ahrar al-Sham, and gave rise to accusations of a deliberate plan to undermine merger initiatives.<sup>8</sup>

In light of the failure of merger initiatives, the intensified strikes, and the ongoing Astana talks, it is not surprising that Jabhat Fateh al-Sham perceived a broader internationally backed conspiracy in the works to isolate and then destroy it. This led to the group launching an assault on a faction called Jaysh al-Mujahideen, a group formed in Aleppo at the turn of 2013-2014 as part of a wider rebel push back against the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham. Jaysh

d For example, @shamilthreer, previously @shamel1020—an account operated by someone claiming to be an ex-Ahrar al-Sham fighter who has now joined Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham—tied the formation of Jaysh al-Ahrar to problems surrounding alleged diversion of heavy weaponry to the north Aleppo countryside front, preventing an effective effort to break the siege of east Aleppo again. Though this version of events is disputed, it is notable that some artillery and missile units were signatories to the initial formation of Jaysh al-Ahrar, and at least four battalions from the Artillery and Missiles Brigade of Ahrar al-Sham have joined Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham so far as per a statement issued by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham on February 1, 2017 (<https://justpaste.it/ahraralshamdefection1feb2017>), so there could at least have been a perception of unnecessary diversion of weaponry. In any case, there is no doubt about the general disapproval of the 'Euphrates Shield' operation among the elements of Ahrar al-Sham that pushed for a merger with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. The coordination between Turkey and Russia has inflamed that fault-line. For more, see Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Syrian Rebel Mergers: A Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki Perspective," January 7, 2017.

e The best known Ahrar al-Sham figure exemplifying this currently is Labib Nahhas, who wrote critically of the merger talks with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham in a series of tweets on December 26, 2016. These tweets can be viewed at <https://justpaste.it/11rm5>.

f Ahrar al-Sham posted photos with English language captions mentioning operations to retake the town of al-Bab in north Aleppo province, which is the main Euphrates Shield operation. Posted on Telegram channel Ahrar al-Sham International, February 10, 2017, at <https://justpaste.it/ahraralsham10feb2017>.

g The precise, detailed reasons for the failure of merger talks involving Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham are a matter of dispute. Going into the debate in-depth is beyond the purview of this article. The director of Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki's media office (now part of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham) referred this author to the lengthy testimony conveyed in tweets of Sheikh Hussam al-Atrash of the group (who is also part of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham now) about various merger projects. This testimony can be viewed at <https://justpaste.it/135v1>.

al-Mujahideen had originally been a larger coalition that included Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, though the latter group subsequently left. Jaysh al-Mujahideen has received Western backing via the MOM operations room<sup>h</sup> in Turkey; was among the signatories to the agreement to form the Syria Liberation Command Council; and attended the Astana talks. The attack on Jaysh al-Mujahideen that began on January 24, 2017, was preceded by clashes between Ahrar al-Sham and the al-Qa`ida-aligned group Jund al-Aqsa that had been integrated into Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. The dynamics behind those clashes, however, should be regarded as separate from Jabhat Fateh al-Sham's attack on Jaysh al-Mujahideen.<sup>i</sup>

In a statement released on January 24,<sup>9</sup> Jabhat Fateh al-Sham characterized its attacks as preemptive, citing the airstrikes and Astana talks as measures designed to isolate and attack the group. Jabhat Fateh al-Sham therefore argued "it was necessary for us to foil the conspiracies and push them back before they should come about." At the same time, the group was careful to push back against being equated with the Islamic State, emphasizing that it was not declaring *takfir* on the other factions (i.e. it was not pronouncing them to be apostates from Islam, something for which the Islamic State is notorious).

However, the attack on Jaysh al-Mujahideen precipitated wider infighting between Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and other insurgent factions, which took differing approaches on how to deal with the Jabhat Fateh al-Sham aggression. In Latakia province, for example, where insurgent strongholds are confined to the northeast corner, Jaysh al-Mujahideen quickly gave up its bases, and no reports emerged of wider infighting.<sup>10</sup> In Idlib province, multiple factions became embroiled in clashes with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. Contrasting approaches in Idlib province are illustrated in the cases of Suqur al-Sham on the one hand and Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham on the other. The leader of Suqur al-Sham, which had merged with Ahrar al-Sham at one point but then broke off in 2016, called for a general mobilization against Jabhat Fateh al-Sham with a view to wiping out the group.<sup>11</sup> Faylaq al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham, however, issued statements in which they emphasized their rejection of targeting and isolating Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, while also making clear that they would mobilize to deter any aggressive action by one faction against another—a warning to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham to cease its attacks.<sup>12</sup>

More crucially, the attacks provided an impetus for plausible mergers to be accomplished. From the perspective of factions feel-

ing threatened by Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, a logical means of protection would be to join Ahrar al-Sham. Despite acting as the key enabler of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and its predecessor in Idlib province (through the Jaysh al-Fateh military alliance established in 2015 that scored key territorial gains against the regime), Ahrar al-Sham had nonetheless come to be seen in the province as the main group that could act as a local counterbalance to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and provide protection for smaller, more 'moderate' groups. Sensing this dynamic, in late January 2017, a number of Islamic scholars—the most notable of them Sheikh Osama al-Rifa'i of the Syrian Islamic Council who had previously issued a statement against Jabhat Fateh al-Sham<sup>13</sup>—issued a call to the multiple factions clashing with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham to join Ahrar al-Sham. They also urged Ahrar al-Sham to "protect the precepts and principles of the Syrian revolution" and to broaden its Shura Council to accommodate the factions it called on to join its group. These scholars entitled their initiative "Saving the north of Syria."<sup>14</sup>

Of the factions addressed in the call, five out of six heeded at least in part the call to merge with Ahrar al-Sham, issuing a joint statement on January 26 that they would join the group.<sup>j</sup> The clarification 'in part' is used here because for two of the factions that heeded the call—the Shami Front and Jaysh al-Islam—fighters in only specific geographical sectors declared a merger with Ahrar al-Sham. The distinction appears to have been based out of necessity. In the case of the Shami Front, this entailed its more vulnerable west Aleppo countryside-based contingents, while for Jaysh al-Islam the merger only applied to its more vulnerable northern affiliates. The main contingents of both groups are based in north Aleppo countryside<sup>k</sup> and East Ghouta, respectively, where Jabhat Fateh al-Sham has no significant presence that could pose a threat and where these groups are larger than Ahrar al-Sham. The one faction that did not heed the call to merge, Faylaq al-Sham, likely refrained because it has stronger, more substantial assets than Ahrar al-Sham in the north Aleppo countryside<sup>l</sup> and is more powerful in northwest Syria than the Shami Front's west Aleppo contingent and Jaysh al-Islam's northern affiliates. Therefore, it would have no need to seek protection in Ahrar al-Sham.

### The Formation of Hay'at Tahir al-Sham

Conversely, on January 28—two days after the Ahrar al-Sham expansion announcement—Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and groups closely aligned with it came together and declared their own merger under the name of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham ("Liberation of al-Sham Com-

h MOM is military operations center in Ankara created by Turkey known by its Turkish initials. Its purpose is to coordinate rebel activities in Syria, and the CIA is reportedly a participant in the operations room. Erika Solomon, "The rise and fall of a US-backed rebel commander in Syria," *Financial Times*, February 9, 2017.

i Though Jund al-Aqsa has publicly proclaimed its alignment with al-Qa`ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, it has also featured Islamic State sympathizers in its ranks. On account of this problem and its hardline approach to dealing with other factions and civil society, the group has frequently been accused of being an Islamic State cell. In October 2016, the group ostensibly dissolved itself and joined Jabhat Fateh al-Sham amid clashes with Ahrar al-Sham, which renewed in January 2017. This led to a clarification statement from Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, disavowing Jund al-Aqsa and stating that there was never a collective allegiance pledge to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. For the statement and translation, see Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Jabhat Fateh al-Sham removes Jund al-Aqsa from its ranks," Jihad Intel, January 23, 2017. Since being disavowed by Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, the group has fragmented with a pro-Islamic State splinter by the name of Liwa al-Aqsa.

j The signatories are Jaysh al-Islam in the north, Tajammu Fa Istaqim Kama Umirta, the Shami Front in west Aleppo, Jaysh al-Mujahideen, and Suqur al-Sham. "Joint statement from the biggest revolutionary factions in the north," January 26, 2017, <https://justpaste.it/5factionsjoinahrar>.

k The Shami Front has particularly important assets in the Azaz area bordering Turkey. The group is the main faction in the town of Azaz itself and has had a role in the management of the important Bab al-Salama border crossing. Author research.

l Faylaq al-Sham is an important component of the Euphrates Shield operations. In a conversation with this author on February 15, 2017, the former spokesman for Northern Storm (one of the Shami Front affiliates in the north Aleppo countryside) characterized Faylaq al-Sham as favored by Turkey over the Shami Front, which he said was more dependent on U.S. backing.

mission”).<sup>15m</sup> It is hard not to see this merger initiative as a response to Ahrar al-Sham’s expansion announcement, seeking to prevent what it feared might become a mass rallying behind Ahrar al-Sham amid the infighting, which would risk isolating Jabhat Fateh al-Sham further and perhaps culminate in a much stronger campaign to eliminate the group. The initial constituent groups behind this merger alongside Jabhat Fateh al-Sham are either of similar ideological orientation to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (i.e. al-Qa`ida-aligned jihadis)—most notably Jabhat Ansar al-Din<sup>n</sup>—or groups that have established or long had particularly close working relationships with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and its predecessors, an analysis that applies to Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, Jaysh al-Sunna,<sup>o</sup> and Liwa al-Haqq. Clearly acting as a counterpart to the Islamic scholars that declared the “Saving the north of Syria” initiative, a number of clerics, including Sheikh Abdullah al-Muheisseni, declared that they would join Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham.<sup>16</sup> Besides these foundational constituent groups and clerics, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham also includes elements of Ahrar al-Sham that had been pushing for a merger with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham in the first place, including Hashim al-Sheikh, who has been designated the overall leader of the new group.<sup>17</sup>

Since the declaration of the mergers under Ahrar al-Sham as per the ‘Saving the north of Syria’ initiative and the formation of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, both sides have been competing with each other to win over smaller insurgent groups. For Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, securing the defection of more and more Ahrar al-Sham affiliates is of vital importance. Ahrar al-Sham has sought to counter this problem by drawing attention on social media to local affiliates’ declarations of their continued allegiance to the overall leader of Ahrar al-Sham,

m As of February 15, 2017, a number of additional groups beyond the five initial signatories have joined Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham. The most important of these in propaganda value for Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham are Mujahidu Ashida (an Ahrar al-Sham splinter whose leader was the final overall commander of rebel-held east Aleppo) and local groups that declared defections from Ahrar al-Sham, such as Qawafil al-Shuhada’ of Khan Sheikhou in southern Idlib province, Suqur al-Izz of Ma’ar Shurin (also southern Idlib province) and Saryat al-Aqsa of Aleppo province. At least one addition to Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham constitutes a well-known long-standing group from the Syrian civil war: the Latakia-based Kata’ib Ansar al-Sham, which declared that it had joined Jaysh al-Islam in December 2016 and had long been involved in coalitions alongside Ahrar al-Sham—namely, the Syrian Islamic Front and then the Islamic Front. Other defections constitute splinters from the groups that have recently joined Ahrar al-Sham, such as Katibat Ahrar al-Janub (operating in south Aleppo countryside) and Katibat al-Nasir li-Din Allah, both from the Shami Front. Finally, some defections involve seemingly independent groups that were otherwise unknown in the public realm until now, such as the Katibat Taliban in the north Idlib town of Sarmada. Author research.

n Jabhat Ansar al-Din was initially formed as a jihadi coalition in July 2014 constituting four groups: Jaysh al-Muhajireen wa al-Ansar, the Green Battalion, Harakat Sham al-Islam, and Harakat Fajr al-Sham al-Islamiya. The Green Battalion merged with Jaysh al-Muhajireen wa al-Ansar, which then joined Jabhat al-Nusra in 2015. In December 2016, the two remaining components of Jabhat Ansar al-Din formally merged, dropping their separate group names and identities. Author research.

o Jaysh al-Sunna was one of the components of the original Jaysh al-Fateh alliance. The group’s origins trace back to the Homs area, and its fighters initially received some training from an FSA faction called the 10<sup>th</sup> Brigade in Latakia, which, according to Latakia-based pro-rebel activist Muhammad Fayzo (conversation with the author, February 12, 2017), is now very small in number. The 10<sup>th</sup> Brigade today appears to have a close relationship with Faylaq al-Sham.

Abu Ammar.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, both sides have issued standard rhetorical calls to broader unity.<sup>19</sup>

## The Implications

The present circumstances are a crucial inflection point for the wider Syrian insurgency, especially in the north of the country. The situation is not exactly analogous with that of the Islamic State and its relationship with the wider insurgency in that there is no state of total war where battlelines have been clearly drawn with thousands of casualties. Were such a state of events to arise between Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham in particular, it would likely spell the end of the insurgency in Idlib province, as the regime could exploit the opportunity to secure major advances. The balance of forces at the present time can be seen as an impetus to avoid all-out internecine war on account of some kind of mutually assured self-destruction. It should also be remembered that at the more local levels, familial ties between members of different factions can also act as a mechanism of control in cases of infighting.

The clashes between factions aligned with Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham and its allies died down after the mergers. The former instead focused on a conflict in the Idlib-Hama border areas with a group called Liwa al-Aqsa, a pro-Islamic State splinter from Jund al-Aqsa.<sup>p</sup> In the immediate term, that conflict could help bolster Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham’s image as a bulwark against what is seen as ‘real extremism’ in the wider Syrian insurgent environment—that is, those aligned with the Islamic State. This, in turn, could increase popular support and legitimacy for Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham. It could also act as a deterrent to renewed, increased infighting between Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham and the wider insurgency. An active move by Ahrar al-Sham against Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, particularly at a time when airstrikes continue to target the group, could cause a mass rallying of popular support behind Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, perhaps leading to further defections.<sup>q</sup>

These developments do not rule out completely the possibility of a wider clash occurring again. Possible triggers might include disputes over resources and border controls as well as tensions caused by a continuation of Ahrar al-Sham’s long-standing function as a local restraint on more hardline actions by the likes of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.

Essentially, the choice for the wider Syrian insurgency at this stage is to work more closely with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham by joining the new Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (or at least following its lead in strategic moves) or to work more closely with Turkey,<sup>20</sup> which can mean joining Ahrar al-Sham, though it is by no means the sole option in

p There had not been any major renewed clashes as of mid-February 2017. Author interview, former Jaysh al-Mujahideen spokesman (who did not join Ahrar al-Sham and is based in west Aleppo countryside), February 2017.

q While following the declarations of allegiances on social media and defections from Ahrar al-Sham so far can give an impression of a major split in Ahrar al-Sham, the movement itself has sought to counter that notion. Besides advertising renewed pledges of allegiance and statements from smaller groups that they are joining Ahrar al-Sham, an infographic was widely circulated on February 15, 2017, putting the total number of Ahrar al-Sham defections to Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham at 955, with the majority of those defections in Idlib. On this reading therefore only a minority of the group has joined Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham. In a recent interview, Ahrar al-Sham Faruq Abu Bakr denied that the defections had had a significant impact on the movement. See “Ahrar al-Sham: Between Defections and Mergers,” al-Qabas, February 15, 2017.

this regard.<sup>1</sup> Neither of these options can realize the original goal of the insurgency to overthrow the regime. Indeed, though Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham clearly espouses that goal and rejects notions of ceasefires, the best it can hope to achieve in the foreseeable future is limited gains of rural ground against the regime. At this point, the forces backing the regime are too strong for the insurgency to be able to take over any major Syrian cities, in part or in whole. Working more closely with Turkey will also not lead to major territorial gains for the insurgency, in light of Turkey's wider policy shifts and rapprochement with Russia in particular. However, there is the possibility Turkey will act as a guarantor to preserve the remaining territory of the insurgency in the north in the medium to long term. It may even be the case that Turkey could eventually intervene on the ground in Idlib province, somewhat similar to its intervention as part of Euphrates Shield, but aimed at limiting Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's influence in the northern border areas.

Despite some arguments offered by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham supporters denouncing analysts who would see the new group as essentially al-Qa`ida,<sup>21</sup> there appears to be little distinction in reality.

r For Ahrar al-Sham in particular, the defection of hardliners to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham reduces internal pressure on the group over the controversy of participation in the Euphrates Shield operation, allowing closer ties with Turkey to continue. Thus, while it may not be appropriate to speak of a move towards 'moderation' (undoubtedly, the group still wants a Sunni Islamist-led order in Syria that is very problematic), the choice of maintaining ties with Turkey and regional backers over throwing in one's lot with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and its allies is apparent.

Jabhat Fateh al-Sham likely constitutes the largest single component of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, with al-Julani rumored to be the military commander of the new entity.<sup>22</sup> Regardless of whether some elements of what was Jabhat al-Nusra/Jabhat Fateh al-Sham have rejected joining the new entity (e.g. the Jordanian Sami al-Oreidi)<sup>23</sup> for whatever reasons, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham fits in with the al-Qa`ida vision of integrating more deeply into the wider Syrian insurgency to establish a broader popular front and pushing for the end goal of an Islamic emirate or government project as a stepping stone to reviving the caliphate. Incidentally, it may be the case that this dynamic of continuing to seek popular support prevents a Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham campaign to bring down Ahrar al-Sham, thus reinforcing a strategic stalemate between Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and the wider insurgency.

At this stage, few if any good options remain for the Syrian insurgency. But throwing in one's lot with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham essentially amounts to a final death blow to any viable trends in the insurgency espousing a more 'moderate' vision. The airstrikes will continue, and merging with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham will simply make such groups that do merge additional targets for those strikes, besides resulting in isolation from whatever wider international backing remains for the Syrian insurgency. In such a scenario, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham would be dragging down the wider insurgency into oblivion alongside it. Survival, not fantastical notions of victory over the regime, seems to be the name of the game now and for the foreseeable future. **CTC**

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# The Islamic State's Western Teenage Plotters

By Robin Simcox

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**Since September 2014, the Islamic State has been successful in persuading teenagers and pre-teens in the West to carry out attacks there. As of the end of 2016, there had been 34 such plots in seven countries, with civilians most commonly targeted and knives repeatedly the weapon of choice. In the majority of cases, the plotters were in direct contact with the Islamic State. The data also suggests that this problem is worsening; on average, there were two plots per month in 2016. Moreover, the Islamic State's ideology, Manichean world view, use of social media, and online propaganda has a particular appeal to young people.**

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In September 2014, the Islamic State's external operations emir, Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, called on the group's Western supporters to carry out attacks against "disbelievers" using any method possible. The first person to take up the instruction, two days later, was an Australian teenager. Abdul Numan Haider was 18 years old when he stabbed two police officers in Melbourne before being shot and killed. The Islamic State praised the attack, labeling it a "direct result" of al-Adnani's call to arms.<sup>1</sup>

Haider's is not an isolated case. In the past two years, the Islamic State has inspired, and in some cases directed, teenagers and even pre-teens to carry out a series of terror operations in the West.<sup>a</sup> Europe's youngest terrorist—a 12-year-old boy—was detained in December 2016 after attempting to bomb a Christmas market and town hall in Ludwigshafen, Germany.<sup>2</sup>

The ability to draw Western youth into Islamist terror networks is not unique to the Islamic State. One of the al-Qa`ida suicide bombers who struck the London transport network on July 7, 2005, Hasib Hussain, was 18 years old at the time.<sup>3</sup> There are numerous other examples. Yet the Islamic State has had far more success in recruiting Western teens and pre-teens than any other terrorist group. In France alone, almost 2,000 teenagers are assessed by French officials to have been radicalized by the Islamic State, with a 121 percent increase between 2015 and 2016. At least 17 of its teenagers have been killed fighting in Syria or Iraq.<sup>4</sup>

The dissemination of its propaganda online is part of the reason the Islamic State has been able to find unparalleled success with

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a Definitions of what constitutes "the West" vary. In this article, however, it includes North America, Europe, and Australia.

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this demographic group. The increase in social media platforms, their popularity with the millennial generation, and that same generation's technological savviness in using them have all aided the Islamic State's efforts. For example, according to one American survey, only two percent of individuals between 13 and 33 years of age do not use social media platforms.<sup>5</sup> The Islamic State has not only disseminated its propaganda and ideology far and wide electronically, but it has been able to contact teenagers directly via social media platforms and, just as importantly, been contacted by them. One consequence of this has been the Islamic State's use of messaging apps to encourage teenagers to plan attacks. Such plots have been described as being directed by the Islamic State via "remote-control."<sup>6</sup>

The Islamic State has also had success in appealing to young girls. According to Germany's Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, around half of all referrals for anti-radicalization counseling are for girls, with a significant increase since the end of 2014.<sup>7</sup> Young women and girls have also volunteered to serve as brides to jihadis in Syria; approximately 600 Western females are believed to have made the journey.<sup>8</sup>

This article focuses on teens and pre-teens in the West (those aged between 12 and 19) that have become involved in Islamic State terrorism. It draws on data the author collected on all terror attacks and plots involving those in this age range that have emerged in the West and were claimed, directed, encouraged, or inspired<sup>b</sup> by the Islamic State. Parts of the data relate to pending court cases. In such cases, all comment from the author hypothesizes that prosecution claims will be borne out, but this study does not explore the detail of any case or offer any judgment.

This study has identified 34 alleged or confirmed plots that took place in the period between al-Adnani's call for attacks in September 2014 and the end of December 2016 (see appendix). Due to reporting restrictions on minors charged with crimes, extensive biographical details for these individuals are not always disclosed. However, using what information is publicly available, this study outlines the emerging trends.

## Trends

### Volume

Between September 2014 and December 2016, a total of 34 plots or alleged plots were organized by Islamic State-inspired or -directed teens and pre-teens. These 34 plots involved 44 teenage and pre-teen participants. The threat appears to be growing. In 2015, there were seven plots involving teenagers and pre-teens. In 2016, there were 24 (71 percent of the total). Therefore, there was an average of

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b For example, if an individual was in possession of propaganda identifiably belonging to the group or if they were known to be following the September 2014 instructions from Abu Mohammed al-Adnani.

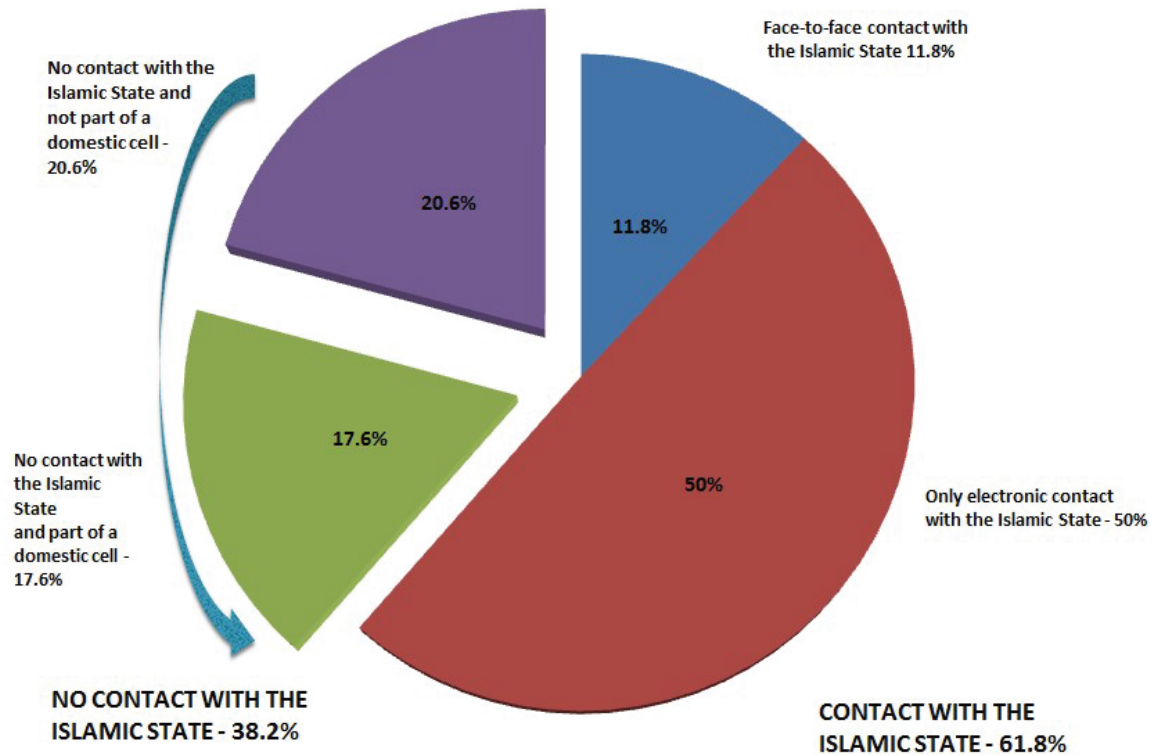


Figure 1: Teenage and preteen perpetrators' interaction with the Islamic State

two plots per month involving teens or pre-teens in 2016, with nine plots uncovered in September alone.

#### Age and Gender

The mean age of these participants is 16.7; the median 17; and the mode 18. Of the 44 participants, 35 (80 percent) were male, and nine (20 percent) were female. By contrast, 96 percent of Islamist-related offenses logged in the United Kingdom between 1998 and 2010 were committed by males;<sup>9</sup> in the United States, 95 percent of al-Qa`ida-related offenses between 1997 and 2011 were committed by males.<sup>10</sup> While these studies analyzed plots involving perpetrators of all ages and not just those involving teens and pre-teens, it does still seem clear that the Islamic State has sparked an uptick in young female participation in Islamist terrorist activity.

#### Countries

The 34 plots were directed at targets in seven countries: Australia, Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The country most commonly targeted was France, which has faced 11 plots (32 percent of the total amount). The next most commonly targeted was Australia (8 plots, or 24 percent), followed by Germany (7 plots, or 21 percent). All of the German plots and all but one of the French plots occurred in 2016, suggesting the threat to Europe from this type of terrorism increased significantly that year.

#### 'Success' Rate

Authorities did not have prior intelligence of the planning of 11 plots (32 percent). On one occasion, that of the 12-year-old German Iraqi who planted two bombs in Germany, authorities were unaware of the plan yet the actual attack failed. The child placed a nail bomb at a Christmas market on November 26, which failed to detonate,

and then another near a city hall on December 5, which a passerby noticed and reported to the police. Experts later judged it not to be viable.<sup>11</sup>

On another occasion, in September 2016, an 18-year-old Australian teenager was arrested after acting suspiciously near the Sydney Opera House. The teenager told police that, "I'm here because ISIS has instructed me to carry out an attack." This was believed to be in relation to an Islamic State propaganda magazine that had been released days earlier, encouraging an attack in Australia and specifically referring to the Sydney Opera House. The teen was in possession of automotive fluid but not a viable explosive device.<sup>12</sup>

In all the other plots, the attacks were carried out. These occurred in Germany (on a further three occasions), France, Australia (twice) and the United States (twice). These led to two civilian deaths: Curtis Cheng, a civilian police worker in Sydney, Australia, in October 2015,<sup>13</sup> and the Catholic priest Jacques Hamel in Normandy, France, in July 2016.<sup>14</sup> They also produced 28 non-fatal casualties (15 in the United States, nine in Germany, and two each in Australia and France).

#### Targeting

Civilians were the most common target of these plots. That was the case in 17 plots (50 percent) (five in France, four in the United States, three in Germany, two in Australia, one in Austria, one in Denmark, and one in the United Kingdom). Three of these plots on civilians—two in Australia, one in France—also targeted the police.

Including these three plots, the police were targeted on seven (21 percent) separate occasions (five plots in Australia and one in France and Germany). The military was the intended target on three occasions (once in the United States, once in the United Kingdom, and once in France). The U.K. plot also contained a component targeting civilians.

In the remaining cases, the target was not disclosed or had not been finalized by the perpetrator(s).

### Weapons

The weapon of choice in 12 (35 percent) of these plots was an edged weapon.<sup>c</sup> On 11 occasions, the weapon used was a knife. Indeed, a knife was used in six of the nine plots that were successfully executed, including in Jacques Hamel's murder. One case involved the use of a machete (the stabbing of a Jewish teacher in Marseille).

Edged weapons were used alongside other instruments. A knife was used in conjunction with an axe during Muhammad Riyad's attack against passengers on a train in Germany in July 2016<sup>15</sup> and was planned to be used alongside guns in a plot against a French military base in July 2015.<sup>16</sup> A knife was used alongside a car in Sevdet Besim's plan to run over and then behead a police officer in Australia in April 2015<sup>17</sup> and in Abdul Artan's attack on students at Ohio State University in November 2016.<sup>18</sup> In one example, a knife was used as a last resort, with Ines Madani attempting to stab a policeman while resisting arrest in September 2016. Madani was allegedly part of a cell suspected of planning a series of attacks, including the bombing of a train station in Paris. The plot was disrupted after a car belonging to Madani that contained five gas cylinders and three petrol tanks was allegedly discovered near Notre Dame Cathedral.<sup>19</sup> Including the Madani plot, explosives were to be used in nine attacks, although only one of these was executed (against a Sikh temple in Essen, Germany, injuring three).<sup>20</sup>

Six cases involved the use of firearms. This included three cases in the United States, none of which came to fruition. There was also one failed plot involving a firearm in Australia and one in the United Kingdom. However, one of the plots saw a 15-year-old shoot dead an Australian police official in the Sydney suburb of Parramatta in October 2015.<sup>21</sup>

On nine occasions, the method of attack was either undisclosed or ultimately unclear due to the plot being insufficiently advanced.

### Contact with the Islamic State

In 21 of the 34 plots (61.8 percent), the perpetrator or one of the perpetrators in a cell had been in known contact with the Islamic State. (See Figure 1). On 17 occasions, this contact took place only electronically, with encrypted messaging services such as Telegram proving popular. In eight of these cases, teenage perpetrators were in contact with the same man: a Syria-based French terrorist named Rachid Kassim.<sup>d</sup> These cases all occurred in France, between July and September 2016.

c This classification was previously—and helpfully—used by Sam Mullins. See Sam Mullins, "The Road to Orlando: Jihadist-Inspired Violence in the West, 2012-2016," *CTC Sentinel* 9:6 (2016): p. 26.

d Kassim was allegedly in contact with Abdelmalik Petitjean and Adel Kermiche, who murdered Catholic priest Jacques Hamel; a 16-year-old girl arrested in Melun, a Paris suburb; an 18-year-old girl arrested in Clermont Ferrand, France; Ines Madani, whose plans included bombing a train station; two 15-year-old boys arrested in Paris who were planning knife attacks; a French Egyptian, also aged 15, who volunteered to carry out a terrorist operation; and two girls, aged 17 and 19, who lived in Nice and were also planning an attack. Lori Hinnant, "Officials: 1 IS recruiter links attackers, jihadis in France," Associated Press, September 12, 2016; "Did jihadist Rachid Kassim lure French youths to plot attacks?" BBC News, September 15, 2016; "Police in France arrest teenagers in Nice on suspicion of terrorism," DW, September 25, 2016.

In only four cases (11.8 percent) had there been any known face-to-face interaction with Islamic State operatives. These all related to 2016 plots (three in Germany, one in Denmark).<sup>e</sup>

### Social Plotting

Of the 34 plots, it appears there are only seven cases (20.6 percent) where the perpetrators seemed to be acting truly independently—without an accomplice, fellow cell members, the involvement of an electronic guide from the Islamic State, or an undercover informant or agent. (See Figure 1). Three of these cases relate to the United States: Faisal Mohammed (November 2015), Mahin Khan (July 2016), and Abdul Artan (December 2016). Three are in Australia (Abdul Numan Haider, September 2014; Tamim Khaja, May 2016; and an unnamed teen, September 2016), and the other involved an unnamed teen in Marseille, France (January 2015).

Yet there are caveats to some of these cases. Several plotted on their own but were not "loners."<sup>22</sup> Khan had attempted to make contact with a terrorist based in Pakistan for guidance;<sup>23</sup> Haider was associated with the notoriously extremist Islamic center Al-Furqan in Melbourne.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the primary terror threat cannot be said to come from teenage loners.

There are several likely reasons why teenagers tend to be more commonly involved in plots with others, as opposed to acting alone. Teenagers and pre-teens may be more vulnerable to peer pressure (both from adults or their peers), and they may require expertise from more experienced individuals or guidance from charismatic recruiters in order to fulfill their plans. However, it should also be remembered that terrorist plots involving individual actors of all ages whose offenses were not reliant upon or connected to any kind of network are actually exceedingly rare. In the United States, for example, between 1997 and 2011 such actors comprised four percent of all al-Qa`ida-related offense perpetrators.<sup>25</sup>

It is notable, however, that in five of these seven cases where individuals were acting autonomously and alone, their plotting went unnoticed. On four of these occasions, they were able to carry out their attacks (always involving an edged weapon and leading to a total of seven injuries). The conventional wisdom that so-called lone-wolf attacks using easily purchasable weapons are harder for authorities to detect and subsequently stop is backed up by the admittedly very limited dataset used in this study.

In 14 of the 34 plots (41 percent), youngsters worked in domestic cells with others who lived in the same country. Nine of these cells (26 percent) contained at least one adult. Five (15 percent) were comprised solely of other youngsters. The highest number of teen-

e "Safia S." had met Islamic State recruiters in Turkey. The 16-year-old girl who planned to bomb two schools in Copenhagen did so with an individual who had fought alongside the Islamic State in Syria. "From Hanover to IS: The case of Safia S.," *Deutsche Welle*, October 19, 2016; "Danish teen charged with plot to bomb Jewish school," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, March 8, 2016; "Danish 16-year old girl charged with planning to bomb schools," Reuters, March 8, 2016; Jamie Crawford, "U.S. soldier helps foil plot to blow up school in Denmark," CNN, April 21, 2016. "Shaas al-M" joined the Islamic State and fought alongside the group while in Syria before heading to Germany. Ruth Bender, "Germany Charges Syrian Immigrant With Supporting ISIS," *Wall Street Journal*, October 27, 2016. "Mahir al-H" and "Ibrahim M" are suspected of being sent to Germany by the Islamic State in preparation for an attack. Andy Eckardt, "Germany Arrests 3 in Schleswig-Holstein Suspected of ISIS Links," NBC News, September 13, 2016.

agers or children in any one cell was three—those responsible for bombing a Sikh temple in Essen, Germany, in April 2016.

Of these 14 plots involving cells, eight (24 percent) were also in contact with the Islamic State (six in electronic contact; two had some form of face-to-face contact). The other six (17.6 percent) had no contact with the Islamic State but took inspiration from their ideology. (See Figure 1).

#### *Aspirant or Frustrated Travelers*

Fourteen of the 34 plots (41 percent) involved individuals who had expressed an interest in traveling to Syria to join the Islamic State. Eleven plots contained ‘frustrated travelers’ who had made clear efforts to travel to the caliphate (or were suspected of doing so) but had been thwarted in their attempts (five plots in Australia, four plots in France, and two in Germany). The other three plots had seen individuals either express an interest in travel to Syria after carrying out the attack or it was unclear when exactly they wished to make the journey.

Both the murderers of French priest Jacques Hamel had tried to travel to Syria.<sup>26</sup> One of the assailants, Adel Kermiche, was wearing a monitoring bracelet for precisely this reason, having tried unsuccessfully to travel on multiple occasions.<sup>27</sup> In Australia, convicted Anzac Day terror plotter Sevdet Besim stated on his ‘martyrdom’ video: “At first, I wanted nothing else but to leave this country and live in the Islamic State, however after many complications with my passport, I realized this could not be done.”<sup>28</sup>

On two occasions, the Islamic State is known to have encouraged ‘frustrated travelers’ to carry out attacks at home instead. This was the case with a cell based in the south of France that then allegedly planned an attack on a military base in July 2015.<sup>29</sup> It was also the case with “Safia S.” in Germany, although this case is more complex. Safia S. made it as far as Turkey before being collected by her mother, yet she had connected with Islamic State members while there who persuaded her of the need to carry out an attack in Germany rather than travel to Syria. Safia S. was also in electronic contact with another individual who provided advice on how to carry out her attack. She stabbed a policeman in Hanover in February 2016.<sup>30</sup>

#### *Further Observations*

There are other trends becoming apparent in these cases that should be monitored as more data becomes available. For example, there are multiple cases of parents alerting the authorities to increasingly radical behavior of their children. The parents of one of the Normandy church attackers did so as their son’s behavior became ever more extreme and as he attempted to travel to Syria.<sup>31</sup> The mother of “Ismael K.,” who was part of a cell planning an attack on a military base in the south of France, had previously prevented her son from traveling to Syria.<sup>32</sup> In the United States, it was the father of Justin Sullivan, a 19-year-old from North Carolina who aimed to carry out shootings on the Islamic State’s behalf with a semi-automatic rifle, who flagged his son’s sympathies for the Islamic State to the police.<sup>33</sup>

This illustrates how parents are clearly useful in identifying changes in behavior and possible violent leanings. However, these cases are not always black and white. Although Madani’s father reported her to French authorities,<sup>34</sup> he himself had also been reported as an Islamist radical.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, Safia S.’s mother retrieved her daughter from Turkey but had also previously sent her to a mosque that put her in contact with notorious salafi clerics, which

may have contributed to her radicalization.<sup>36</sup>

There were only two known converts to Islam among the teenage offenders: the North Carolinian Sullivan and an unnamed 16-year-old Danish girl, who planned to bomb two Copenhagen schools and worked alongside an individual who had fought with the Islamic State in Syria in order to do so. On paper, this is a disproportionately low amount: almost a quarter (23 percent) of individuals who committed al-Qa`ida-related offenses in the United States from 1997-2011 were converts. However, the low figure in this study should not be seen as surprising because converts in Islamist terrorist cases tend to carry out offenses later in life. With al-Qa`ida-related offenses, converts were significantly older (most commonly, age 32) at the time of charge than non-converts.<sup>37</sup>

There were five plots (15 percent of the total) perpetrated by refugees, all of which took place in 2016. One of these attacks was carried out by Abdul Artan, a Somali refugee who lived in the United States and injured 11 people in Ohio during an attack that the Islamic State later claimed was carried out on its behalf. The other four were in Germany in 2016, and all involved individuals in contact with the Islamic State. One case involved a refugee from Afghanistan—the July attacks on train passengers in Würzburg, Germany, by Muhammad Riyad.<sup>38</sup>

The other cases involved Syrian refugees. “Shaas al-M.” joined the Islamic State in mid-2013 and was trained by the group in Syria. He was arrested in March 2016 after authorities believed he had carried out reconnaissance on targets in Berlin on behalf of the group. He had allegedly informed the Islamic State he wished to take part in the attack and had also recruited another individual to fight in Syria.<sup>39</sup> In September, “Mohamed J.” was arrested in Cologne, who was in contact with an Islamic State operative about constructing a bomb.<sup>40</sup> In the same month, three Islamic State members (two of whom were teenagers) were arrested in Schleswig-Holstein. They had been based in German refugee shelters and gained entry into Europe thanks to the same smuggling network used by the Islamic State in the November 2015 Paris attack.<sup>41</sup>

The threat nexus linked to refugee flows, therefore, would appear to be at least two-pronged. There are Islamic State operatives who have used the refugee flow to infiltrate Europe and those who become radicalized once they arrive in the West. This latter type of radicalization is made more likely by pre-existing radical networks. In Germany, for example, dislocated youngsters are moving to a new country containing a significant number of Islamic State sympathizers.

## **Conclusion**

The Islamic State’s calls for attacks are increasingly resonating with radical-leaning teens and pre-teens in Europe. The Manichean appeal of the group’s ideology certainly plays a part in this appeal. Yet such has been the Islamic State’s success, the driving force behind its recruitment clearly goes beyond this.

The group has taken advantage of how simple it is today to produce relatively slick digital output. It has then had success in disseminating this propaganda far and wide online, relying on social media channels commonly used by young people. Part of this propaganda has attempted to demonstrate that the Islamic State’s supporters are never too young to join the fight. For example, in March 2015, the Islamic State released a video of a child murdering an Israeli Arab accused of being a spy.<sup>42</sup> Such an act is intended to serve as an inspiration to other young supporters.

Conventional teenage concerns such as peer pressure and wanting to impress one's contemporaries have been mobilized by the Islamic State as recruiting tools. For example, one Islamic State recruiter has used the example of girls taking up the call to violence in order to shame their male counterparts. Following the arrest of alleged Paris train station plotter Madani, Kassim castigated the Islamic State's male supporters via Telegram. "The women, our sisters, went into action ... where are the men? ... you have to understand that if these women went into action, it's because so few men are doing anything ... why are you waiting so long to the point the woman are overtaking you in terms of honor?"<sup>43</sup> Two 15-year-old boys in contact with Kassim were subsequently arrested in the days that followed for planning separate knife attacks in France.<sup>44</sup>

Kassim's frustrations notwithstanding, since al-Adnani's September 2014 call to arms, the Islamic State has had significant success in persuading teenagers in the West to carry out attacks. Unfortunately, the data suggests that the problem of teenage radicalization is worsening.

There are several possible reasons for this. One may be the tem-

po of Kassim's activities. As he is believed to have been killed in a U.S. strike near Mosul earlier this month,<sup>45</sup> perhaps the number of teenage plotters will subsequently diminish. Another is the situation on the ground. Local and regional counterterrorism measures have made traveling to Syria more challenging. Moreover, the Islamic State is no longer capturing territory at a rapid rate; indeed, it is being forced to relinquish parts of its caliphate. As a result, the group has put greater emphasis on its adherents attacking at home rather than traveling to Syria. Indeed, in May 2016, al-Adnani explicitly stated "that the smallest act you do in their lands is more beloved to us than the biggest act done here; it is more effective for us and more harmful to them."<sup>46</sup> Kassim made the same point.<sup>47</sup>

The threat posed by radicalized teens and pre-teens—of both sexes—has increased since the Islamic State declared its caliphate. This reality has already led to two deaths and over two dozen injuries in the West and makes a persuasive case for a greater counterterrorism focus on Islamic State operatives inciting and directing precisely this kind of attack. **CTC**

## Appendix: Terrorist Plots and Attacks by Teens and Pre-Teens in West since Islamic State's Call for Attacks

### 2014

*September (Melbourne, Australia)*

Abdul Numan Haider, 18, attacks police.

*October (Vienna, Austria)*

"Mertkan G.," 14, plot targets civilians.

*December (Sydney, Australia)*

Unnamed perpetrator, 14, targets police.

### 2015

*February (Raleigh, North Carolina, United States)*

Unnamed perpetrator, 16, targets military.

*April (Melbourne, Australia)*

Sevdet Besim, 18, plots to target civilians and police; 'B,' 14, in Blackburn, United Kingdom, encourages this plot.

*May (Melbourne, Australia)*

Unnamed perpetrator, 17, unspecified target.

*June (Morganton, North Carolina, United States)*

Justin Sullivan, 19, plots to target civilians.

*July (Port-Vendres, France)*

"Ismael K.," 17, and "Antoine F.," 19, plots to target military.

*October (Sydney, Australia)*

Farhad Jabar, 15, and Raban Alou, 18, attack police.

*November (Merced, California, United States)*

Faisal Mohammad, 18, attacks civilians.

### 2016

*January (Marseille, France)*

Unnamed perpetrator, 15, targets a civilian.

*January (Copenhagen, Denmark)*

Unnamed perpetrator, 16, targets civilians.

*February (Hannover, Germany)*

"Safia S.," 15, targets police.

*March (Paris, France)*

Two unnamed perpetrators, 15 and 17, target civilians.

*March (Berlin, Germany)*

"Shaas al-M.," 19, unspecified target.

*April (Essen, Germany)*

"Mohammed B.," "Yusuf T.," 16, and "Tolga I.," 17, attack civilians.

*May (Sydney, Australia)*

Tamim Khaja, 18, targets civilians.

*July (Tucson, Arizona, United States)*

Mahin Khan, 18, targets civilians.

*July (Würzburg, Germany)*

Muhammad Riyad, 17, targets civilians.

*July (Normandy, France)*

Abdelmalik Petitjean, 19, and Adel Kermiche, 19, attack civilians.

*August (Paris, France)*

Unnamed perpetrator, 16, unspecified target.

*August (Clermont Ferrand, France)*

Unnamed perpetrator, 18, unspecified target.

*September (London, United Kingdom)*

Haroon Ali Syed, 19, targets civilians and military.

*September (Paris, France)*

Unnamed perpetrator, 15, unspecified target.

*September (Paris, France)*

Ines Madani, 19, targets civilians and police.

*September (Sydney, Australia)*

Unnamed perpetrator, 18, targets civilians.

*September (Paris, France)*

Unnamed perpetrator, 15, targets civilians.

*September (Schleswig-Holstein, Germany)*

"Mahir al-H.," 17, and "Ibrahim M.," 18, unspecified target.

*September (Paris, France)*

Unnamed perpetrator, 15, unspecified target.

*September (Cologne, Germany)*

"Mohamed J.," 16, unspecified target.

*September (Nice, France)*

Unnamed perpetrators, 17 and 19, unspecified target.

*October (Sydney, Australia)*

Unnamed perpetrators, 16, unspecified target.

*October (Columbus, Ohio, United States)*

Abdul Razak Ali Artan, 18, attacks civilians.

*November (Ludwigshafen, Germany)*

Unnamed perpetrator, 12, targets civilians.

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# The Islamic State Looks East: The Growing Threat in Southeast Asia

By Shashi Jayakumar

**While much attention has been focused on the Islamic State threat to Europe, the increasingly fertile ground for jihadi expansion in Southeast Asia means the Islamic State may pose as big a future threat to the East as the West. Islamic State operatives inside Syria and Iraq have leveraged existing local networks in Southeast Asian countries to remotely enable terrorist plots in their home countries, and there is concern that foreign fighters, and not simply Southeast Asian returnees, will export terrorism to the region as the Islamic State suffers setbacks in Syria and Iraq. These threat trends may accelerate if the Islamic State declares a wilaya in parts of Southeast Asia where extremist groups already enjoy safe havens, creating a potential magnet for foreign fighters.**

**M**uch of the current analysis of the Islamic State focuses on its conflict against the West, and Europe in particular. This view, however, neglects the Islamic State's global ambitions and reach. Asia, and particularly Southeast Asia, will likely provide key staging posts for the group, critical to its long-term fortunes. This article analyzes Islamic State and Islamic State-inspired activity in Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia by offering some parallels and contradistinctions vis-à-vis the situation in the West.

## The Syria Factor

Individuals from Southeast Asia have been traveling to Syria (and to a lesser extent, Iraq) to take part in the armed struggle against the Assad regime and then to join the Islamic State or other jihadi groups. Most made the trip from 2013 onward, but a small number of trailblazers made the trip in the preceding years.

There is a lack of reliable government data on exact figures, but the number of people from Southeast Asia who have entered Syria and Iraq to join jihadi groups is thought to be between 600

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and 900, which includes women and children.<sup>a</sup> From Indonesia, estimates vary; between 300 and 800 people are believed to have successfully made the journey.<sup>b</sup> By December 2015, Turkey had deported at least 215 Indonesian citizens (60 percent women and children) who were caught attempting to cross the border into Syria.<sup>1</sup> As for Malaysia, the official tally of militants who had made the journey to Syria stood at approximately 90 in January 2017. Twenty-four Malaysians have been killed, and eight have returned.<sup>c</sup> Approximately 260 Islamic State sympathizers have also been arrested in Malaysia for suspected involvement in militant activities, and 10 Islamic State-linked plots have been interdicted (with one small-scale attack getting through in 2016, which is outlined below).<sup>2 d</sup> The numbers of fighters from the Philippines range from two to 100,<sup>3</sup> but no official figures have been released. Thailand likewise has no credible figures on the number of fighters, although their presence in small numbers (as with Cambodian Cham Muslims) cannot be discounted.<sup>4</sup> Singapore authorities have acknowledged a "handful" of Singaporeans joining the Islamic State in Syria-Iraq.<sup>e</sup>

During the 1980s, hundreds of Southeast Asians traveled to Af-

- a For one estimate of the numbers, although the figures are by no means undisputed, see "Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq," The Soufan Group, December 2015. Individuals from Southeast Asian countries are known to have made the journey to Syria/Iraq in 2016, but there is no consensus by experts on even approximate numbers.
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ghanistan through Pakistan to fight with the mujahideen against the Soviet Union. A rough estimate of the number of Filipinos is between 300 and 500,<sup>5</sup> while up to 800 Indonesians may have made the trip.<sup>6</sup> However, according to one Indonesian scholar interviewed in 2001, many of these may actually have remained in Peshawar, Pakistan, and not taken part in the conflict.<sup>7</sup> Those traveling to Afghanistan during the 1980s trickled in over a number of years, whereas the current crop in the Middle East has been more concentrated, traveling over a shorter span of time and in many cases bringing their families, which was not a feature of the Afghan jihad.

Some differences in data should be noted here, especially for those readers more familiar with the European situation. Security services in Southeast Asian nations do not routinely release figures on citizens who are considered to be radicalized or those who have made attempts to join jihadi groups abroad. There are also few reliable estimates on how many individuals security services are monitoring across the region. The general opacity of data must be taken into consideration when analyzing the Southeast Asian situation.

As with those seeking to leave Europe, travel to the conflict region for Southeast Asians has become more difficult since late 2015. Nonetheless, entry has remained a possibility, even as routes have become more unpredictable and convoluted. For instance, four men from Indonesia were deported from Singapore in February 2016 after it was established that they planned to go to Syria.<sup>8</sup> There is some suggestion that the group believed that transiting through Singapore would assist in building a less suspicious travel footprint.<sup>9</sup>

### A Drumbeat of Terror

Terrorist attacks in Indonesia predate 9/11. In 2000, 19 people were killed and dozens were injured after a string of church bombings on Christmas Eve in Indonesia, carried out by operatives from *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI), which was established in 1993 and became the key al-Qaeda affiliate in Southeast Asia. In Singapore, a series of JI plots—including planned attacks on a subway station and a bus shuttle service used by U.S. service members, and a number of embassies—were thwarted by authorities in late 2001. There were further interdictions in Singapore in the 2000s. Terrorists were more successful in the wider Southeast Asian region. Indonesia's most deadly and well-known terror attack was the Bali bombings in 2002, carried out by the JI, but other plots in Indonesia have also come to fruition. These included bombings of hotels and embassies in 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2009, all carried out by JI or JI splinter groups. Singapore, which for some time after 9/11 was preoccupied with JI, now faces a more complex range of threats. In addition to attacks carried out by jihadi organizations, there is now the danger of lone actors who have become radicalized by engaging with material online. In April and May 2015, two self-radicalized young men were detained by Singaporean authorities; one had plotted to kill government leaders in Singapore as a secondary plan if he was unable to join the Islamic State in Syria.<sup>10</sup>

Another type of threat was discovered in the interdiction (announced in January and May 2016) of two separate cells of radicalized Bangladeshi migrant workers in Singapore (numbering some 35 in total), who were employed in the construction industry. The second cell referred to itself as the Islamic State in Bangladesh and was allegedly focused on carrying out attacks within Bangladesh.<sup>11</sup> However, as analysts and policymakers in Singapore have observed, it would only have taken one of them to think in terms of global

jihad for Singapore to be viewed as a target.<sup>12</sup>

Home to a large expatriate population, Singapore is part of the U.S.-led global coalition in the fight against the Islamic State and has a good track record of interdicting jihadis. Its people and iconic landmarks have also been terrorist targets in the recent past. In August 2016, Indonesian police arrested six men on the island of Batam, which is less than 30 kilometers from Singapore. The cell, linked to (and ultimately answering to) a Syria-based Indonesian Islamic State leader named Bahrūn Naim, had planned to build homemade rockets to fire at Singapore's iconic Marina Bay area.<sup>f</sup>

There has been a drumbeat of terrorist attacks in Southeast Asia in the past few years. One instance was the Erawan Shrine bombing in Bangkok on August 15, 2015, which killed 20 people and injured 120. Two Chinese nationals from the Muslim Uighur minority are, at the time of writing, on trial in Bangkok, charged with staging the attack.<sup>13</sup> The bombing is thought to have been motivated either by anger over the repatriation of Uighur migrants to China or by revenge from the people-smuggling syndicate that facilitated their entry to Thailand.<sup>14</sup> <sup>g</sup> According to a United Nations report published early this year, the threat from the Islamic State to Southeast Asia is "gaining momentum," with the group increasing its focus on the region as a potential recruiting ground.<sup>15</sup>

Most foreign terrorist fighters from Southeast Asia have thus far remained in Syria and Iraq rather than returning home.<sup>16</sup> But while there has not yet to date been an Islamic State-directed plot in Southeast Asia in which plotters were recruited in person by the group and tasked with returning to carry out attacks, 2016 saw a string of plots "enabled" by Southeast Asian Islamic State operatives inside Syria and Iraq. In these instances, operatives communicated instructions and encouragement to Islamic State-aligned cells and sympathizers in their home countries.

Malaysia witnessed its first Islamic State-enabled attack on June 28, 2016, when a grenade was lobbed into a bar near the nation's capital. Fortunately, there were no fatalities. The cell responsible was provided instructions by Muhammad Wanndy Mohamad Jedi, the most well-known of the Malaysian Islamic State fighters in Syria.<sup>17</sup> In Indonesia, recent Islamic State-enabled attacks include those in central Jakarta on January 14, 2016, in which a suicide bomber blew himself up inside a Starbucks cafe, another assailant detonated a small bomb outside a nearby police post, and then two others opened fire on the crowd of onlookers. Eight people were killed, including the four attackers. Despite the coordinated nature of the attacks, the execution was poor. The plan was allegedly masterminded by Aman Abdurrahman, a radical and influential Indone-

f According to Indonesian authorities, the leader of the cell planning to attack Marina Bay, Gigih Rahmat Dewa, had been planning the attack with Bahrūn Naim, with Gigih taking orders from Naim. Arlina Arshad, "Plan to Attack Marina Bay with rocket from Batam foiled," *Straits Times*, August 6, 2016.

g It should be noted that this is just one possible explanation and that there is much that remains unclear about the structure and motivations of the cell that carried out the attack. For an exploration of some further possibilities, see Zachary Abuza, "The Riddle of the Bangkok Bombings," *CTC Sentinel* 8:10 (2015): pp. 34-36.



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sian ideologue who has been incarcerated since 2011.<sup>18h</sup> Indonesian militants thought to be in Syria may also have enabled the January 2016 Jakarta attacks, but there are conflicting reports over whether Bahrun Naim or another Indonesian Islamic State figure known as Bahrumisyah influenced the plot from Syria.<sup>19</sup> Naim's controlling hand was, however, clear in the most recent attack in Indonesia, the failed suicide bombing of a police station in the Central Java city of

Solo in July 2016, in which only the attacker was killed.<sup>20i</sup>

Some have also suggested that background fissures or rivalry within the leadership of the Katibah Nusantara (the Indonesian/Malay brigade within the Islamic State) itself played some role in the attack.<sup>21</sup> However, this is speculation. There is still much to be known about the Katibah. It is, in fact, not altogether clear how coherent the group is or whether it has a unified structure, especially bearing in mind the argument put forward by some analysts (including Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, based on Islamic State primary documents) that there is general Islamic State guidance not to operate national brigades.<sup>22</sup>

In the southern Philippine island of Mindanao, the faction of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) led by Isnilon Hapilon and two other groups pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a video re-

h The Indonesian police, while also assigning a role to Aman Abdurrahman, have also pinned the blame on the Indonesian militants in Syria, which, according to them, facilitated money transfers. See, for example, Francis Chan and Wahyudi Soeriaatmadja, "ISIS 'funded attack in Jakarta,'" *Straits Times*, March 5, 2016. Funds for the attack were transferred to Jakarta from Syria using an internal money remitter. "Nineteenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities," United Nations Security Council, January 13, 2017, p. 19.

i Naim directly communicated with the bomber, Nur Rohman, through encrypted messaging apps including Telegram. It appears that these communications included instructions on the making of IEDs. "The Failed Solo Suicide Bombing and Bahrun Naim's network," *IPAC Report No. 30*, Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, July 2016.

leased in early 2016.<sup>23j</sup> The Islamic State response was to acknowledge the pledge on February 14, 2016, through its al-Furat media wing, but the group seems to have stopped short of an official and open declaration of a wilaya in the southern Philippines.<sup>24k</sup> According to al-Tamimi, one possible reason the Islamic State leadership is less enthusiastic about the “wilaya” model than it was previously is because such declarations lack credibility if there is no semblance of genuine administration on the ground within these franchises.<sup>25</sup> Other equally plausible reasons could also be advanced. The Islamic State may not think that Mindanao has the makings of a viable state with its attendant structure and administration or, as some have posited, the senior leadership of the Islamic State may simply be looking for all Southeast Asian extremist groups to unite behind a single emir before it declares an official wilaya.<sup>26</sup> Currently, there appears to be insufficient cooperation between groups in the region, or indeed within individual countries such as the Philippines, for a single leader to emerge in the near future. Still, cooperation has occurred on an ad hoc basis. An example is the Davao City market bombing in the southern Philippines on September 2, 2016, that killed 15 and wounded approximately 70. While the actual responsibility lies buried beneath claim and counter-claim, the available evidence suggests that the attack was the result of cooperation between Hapilon’s faction of the ASG, the little-known Maute group, and a group that pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in August 2014, Ansarul Khilafa Philippines.<sup>27</sup>

An actual declaration of a pan-Southeast Asian wilaya in the area described above would inevitably have a major impact on the regional security environment. The Islamic State could legitimately claim to have at least a foothold in a triangle comprised of Mindanao, the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, and Malaysian and Indonesian territory on Borneo. These regions are relatively remote, and the reach of various security services into these areas is not particularly strong. The declaration of a new wilaya in Southeast Asia could transform this area into a powerful magnet for jihadist seeking sanctuary, including Islamic State fighters from Southeast Asia currently in Iraq and Syria, who may return, with enhanced capabilities, as the group continues to lose ground there.<sup>l</sup>

But the blowback will likely not be limited to Southeast Asian returnees. Already, there are signs of others coming to the region. In April 2016, a Moroccan bomb-making instructor named Mohammed Katab was killed in a firefight on the southern Philippines island of Basilan.<sup>28</sup> In 2014, the now-deceased Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) leader Santoso, aka Abu Wardah, was sent a small

group of Uighur men from Kuala Lumpur after he made a request for resources to Indonesian Islamic State leader Abu Jandal in Syria.<sup>29</sup> Four were arrested in September 2014 in central Poso, but others made it through. The last MIT Uighur member was killed in a joint Indonesian police-military operation in the jungles of Central Sulawesi in August 2016.<sup>30</sup> Other Uighurs have also popped up on security radars elsewhere in the region from time to time. A cell in the Indonesian island of Batam known as KGR@Katibah GR that had plans to attack the Marina Bay area of Singapore with a rocket is known to have harbored two Uighur militants.<sup>m</sup>

## East and West

The likely fall of Mosul in the coming months, and a likely future effort by either anti-Islamic State coalition or Kurdish forces (or both) to take Raqqa, raises many questions. Where does the future of the Islamic State lie? What will its game plan be? It may well be that the organization will direct its remaining energy on fomenting attacks in the West, with one Islamic State fighter recently suggesting as much in an interview.<sup>n</sup> Many foreign fighters will likely leave Syria and Iraq with Europe in mind. It is equally clear, however, that the Islamic State has a commitment to Southeast Asia, and this interest is likely to increase as the organization suffers further setbacks on the battlefield in Syria and Iraq. Many returnees to Southeast Asia will, of course, be native to the region, and some will be able to leverage links and networks they have in their home countries.<sup>o</sup> But it would be a mistake to assume that it is only Southeast Asians in Syria and Iraq who will attempt to make the journey. Others with no connection to the region might also attempt it. The presence of Uighurs in Southeast Asian cells (as well as their likely involvement in the Erawan Shrine bombing) is one such example. Some of the Uighurs who came to Indonesia are known to have made the journey using established human trafficking networks to move through Myanmar, Thailand, and Malaysia

j Hapilon had first pledged his loyalty to the Islamic State in June 2014.

k Notwithstanding the Islamic State’s acknowledgement of this pledge, it should be noted that there are other extremists groups in the Philippines that do not yet appear to have recognized Hapilon’s supremacy; some also appear to have made separate pledges to the Islamic State.

l There is some suggestion that a trickle of returnees to Indonesia and Malaysia had begun by 2016. Based on figures sometimes given out by security officials, the approximate numbers are several dozen for Indonesia (of whom a handful had been arrested) and considerably fewer for Malaysia, although officials have claimed that many more Malaysians are keen to return home. See “Dozens of ISIS combat veterans have returned to the world’s biggest Muslim-majority nation,” Reuters, October 17, 2016; “Indonesian authorities detain 17 nationals returning from Syria,” Reuters, January 22, 2017; and Naim Zulkifli, “IGP: 50 Msian ISIS fighters attempting to return, police will try to help passage,” *New Straits Times*, November 24, 2016.

m As Indonesian counterterrorism officials have acknowledged, there is ongoing cooperation with Chinese authorities on this very issue of stemming the flow of Uighurs attempting to make common cause with militants in Indonesia. “Indonesia turns to China as ethnic Uighurs join would-be jihadists,” Reuters, January 6, 2016. For unconfirmed reports that Uighurs have attempted to link up with ASG militants in the southern Philippines, see Rommel C. Banlaoi, “Uyghur militants in Southeast Asia: Should PH be worried?” Rappler, January 7, 2016.

n This was Rachid Kassim, a French Islamic State operative believed to have been killed in Iraq in February 2017. For the interview, see Amarnath Amarasingham, “An Interview with Rachid Kassim, Jihadist Orchestrating Attacks in France,” posted on Jihadology, November 18, 2016.

o Leaders of the Katibah Nusantara clearly have established networks in Indonesia, occasionally directing attacks—with varying degrees of success—in that country. See, for example, “The Failed Solo Suicide Bombing and Bahrin Naim’s Network.” Abu Jandal was another key leader of the Indonesian battalion in Syria/Iraq who is viewed by some experts as having more of an operational/fighting role than Bahrin Naim. He was killed in Mosul in early November 2016, according to reports that appear to have been confirmed by his family and also appear supported by social media postings in vernacular Indonesian (postings linked in all likelihood to those from his circle). These reports, while seemingly credible, have at the time of writing yet to be definitively verified. See Fatiyah Wardah and Noor Zahid, “Authorities Probe Report Death of Indonesian Islamic State Leader,” *Voice of America*, November 10, 2016. Jandal is known to have had a network of Islamic State sympathizers in his hometown of Malang in East Java. “Police name three alleged members of ISIS as suspects,” *Antara News*, March 26, 2015.

and then into the hotspots of Indonesia such as Poso.<sup>p</sup> There is a further risk of “conflict being exported to the region,” according to the United Nations. As an unnamed member state has reported, there is a trend among foreign terrorist fighters of non-Southeast Asian origin who face deportation requesting to be sent to Southeast Asian countries where a visa is not required, instead of their home countries.<sup>31</sup>

Moving forward, it will be important to better understand the multifaceted nature of the returnee issue, where—in terms of the numbers—Southeast Asia lags behind Europe. As the European example has shown, not all returnees are bent on fomenting attacks. Some may want nothing more to do with violence. Others may remain ambivalent. By understanding the Western (and particularly European) trajectories better, Southeast Asian countries can better prepare themselves for the coming foreign fighter blowback. Identifying and publicizing narratives of disillusionment will be key to thwarting the ability of the Islamic State and its franchises to make physical or ideological gains in Southeast Asia.

There are several ongoing issues as well as longer-term trends that the Islamic State might seek to leverage in Southeast Asia. There has, in recent years, been increased religious conservatism and rising intolerance throughout the region, linked in part to salafi/Wahhabi strains of thought and *takfiri* ideology becoming more influential in some quarters.<sup>q</sup> One cannot discount the possibility that the Islamic State, or the group’s returnees in Indonesia and Malaysia, will take advantage of this heightened intolerance, much in the same way that al-Qa`ida and then the Islamic State has attempted to take advantage of similar sentiment in Bangladesh.<sup>32</sup>

## Causes Célèbres

There are also specific causes that the Islamic State and its returnees might attempt to leverage. The rising tide of anti-Shi`a sentiment in both Malaysia and Indonesia has been well-documented.<sup>33</sup> The treatment of Uighur Muslims in Western China has provided global terrorists with a longstanding grievance to exploit. The increasingly bloody nature of the Rohingya conflict and the exodus of Rohingya refugees from Rakhine State in Myanmar is inflaming

p This is as noted by Saud Usman Nasution, the then-chief of the Indonesian National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT). Randi Fabi and Augustinus Beo Da Costa, “Indonesia turns to China as ethnic Uighurs join would-be jihadis,” Reuters, January 6, 2016. Separately, there are also thought to be in excess of 1,000 Uighur refugees already in Southeast Asia, fleeing (by their account) Chinese persecution or linked to the militant Turkistan Islamic Movement (by the Chinese account). Rommel C. Banlaoi, “Uyghur militants in Southeast Asia: Should PH be worried?” Rappler, July 13, 2016.

q There is a great amount of literature on this. See Sidney Jones, “Why Indonesian Extremists are Gaining Ground,” *Interpreter*, November 1, 2016, and Murray Heibert, “Indonesia’s Mounting Intolerance towards Minority Groups prompts concern,” *CSIS Commentary*, April 14, 2016. It should be noted, however, that there has not been a discernible uptick in actual support for the Islamic State in Indonesia specifically or the region more broadly. An oft-cited Pew Research Center survey of several countries with predominantly Muslim populations (released in November 2015, with polling done from April-May that year) found overwhelmingly negative views among Indonesians on the Islamic State, with only four percent of those polled expressing favorable or somewhat favorable views of the group. See Jacob Poushter, “In nations with significant Muslim populations, much disdain for ISIS,” Pew Research Center, November 17, 2015, and “Views of ISIS Topline,” Pew Research Center, November 17, 2015. See also Joshua Kurlantzick, “Southeast Asia—The Islamic State’s New Front?” Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, October 4, 2016.

regional mainstream Muslim opinion.

The plight of the Rohingya is not simply a focus of attention in Malaysia. It has also prompted a significant uptick in pro-Rohingya social media output production with a distinctly militant tinge (including on mainstream platforms such as Facebook and YouTube but also extending to closed platforms such as Telegram). Some of this content has its origins in Southeast Asia, but some disseminators appear to be based farther afield.<sup>34</sup> The Rohingya issue has also attracted attention from Indonesian extremists. In late November 2016, Indonesian police arrested three militants from a cell (whose members had sworn allegiance to the Islamic State) planning a bomb attack against the Myanmar embassy in Jakarta, among other targets.<sup>35</sup> In 2013, a plot against the same embassy by local extremists angered by the persecution of the Rohingya was also foiled.<sup>36</sup>

The plight of Rohingya refugees has also gained some degree of notice from groups ranging from the Islamic State to the Taliban.<sup>s</sup> The ethnic and sectarian conflict in Myanmar has already spilled over into Bangladesh, and there are growing signs that what started out as ethnic violence has attracted notice from transnational jihadi groups and Rohingya militants with international connections.<sup>37</sup> And just as in Bangladesh, there now appear to be signs of the targeting of prominent activists (and activists for moderation and dialogue) in Myanmar.<sup>t</sup>

It is worth noting, too, that late 2016 saw the emergence of an armed Rohingya movement in the form of Harakah al-Yakin (HaY), also known as the Faith Movement or Faith Movement Arakan. This group was responsible for the attack on Myanmar military outposts in Rakhine province on October 9, 2016, which in turn triggered a military crackdown on the Rohingya and led to widespread accusations of disproportionate force and atrocities. The Harakah al-Yakin’s beginnings can be traced back to the 2012 sectarian vio-

r This plot appears to have been a credible one and one that had advanced beyond the preliminary planning stage. The high-grade explosives recovered in the operation were estimated to be double (in terms of potential impact) the quantity used in the Jemaah Islamiyah’s Bali October 12, 2002, attacks, which killed 202 people. Niniek Karmini, “Indonesia says 2 militants arrested in Myanmar Embassy plot,” AP, November 27, 2016.

s In his well-known July 1, 2014, speech announcing the establishment of the caliphate, Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi made a direct allusion to the plight of the Rohingya: “So raise your ambitions, O soldiers of the Islamic State! For your brothers all over the world are waiting for your rescue, and are anticipating your brigades. It is enough for you to just look at the scenes that have reached you from Central Africa, and from Burma before that. What is hidden from us is far worse. So by Allah, we will take revenge!” For the critical portions of the speech, see “What did Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi say?” Middle East Eye, July 5, 2014. Separately, a Taliban statement issued in late November 2016 condemned the “the genocide of the over one million minority Muslims of Burma,” placing the blame on the “cruel barbaric actions of the Burmese rulers” and calling on “the entire Muslim Ummah to utilize every means at their disposal to safeguard and protect the oppressed Muslims of Burma.” Aaron Zelin, “New statement from the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan: ‘Concerning Genocide Against the Weak Muslims of Burma,’” posted on Jihadology, November 30, 2016.

t A possible case in point is the assassination of U Ko Ni, a prominent Muslim lawyer and close advisor to Myanmar Prime Minister Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy. Ko Ni had spoken out regularly on human rights issues and against worsening sectarian tensions in the country. It should be noted, however, there is much that remains unclear at the time of writing as to the motivations of the perpetrator, who is in custody. See Wai Moe, “U Ko Ni, a Prominent Muslim lawyer in Myanmar, is Fatally Shot,” *New York Times*, January 29, 2017.

lence between Buddhists and Rohingyas in Myanmar. At least some of its members appear to have fought in other conflicts, and members of its core leadership appear to be based in Saudi Arabia.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

Extremist activity in Southeast Asia has recently continued to escalate, with some of the most recent arrests showing a distinctly transregional or transnational flavor. In January 2017, for example, four individuals—two Bangladeshi nationals, a Filipino man, and a Malaysian woman—were arrested in Malaysia for suspected involvement in a new Islamic State affiliated-cell based in the Philippines.<sup>u</sup> Senior Filipino officials, citing recent intelligence, have noted that extremists in the southern Philippines have been in regular communication with the Islamic State, with the means of contact ranging from social media to text messages to telephone calls.<sup>39</sup> Others comments, perhaps understandably more cryptic, by senior security officials have suggested that terror cells in the Philippines, southern Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia are becoming more organized and are pledging allegiance to the Islamic State.<sup>40</sup> ASG leader Hapilon,<sup>v</sup> the putative emir of the Islamic State in the Philippines, has, according to recent reports, moved from the traditional

Abu Sayyaf stronghold of Basilan to Central Mindanao allegedly at the behest of the Islamic State with the aim of assessing whether Central Mindanao would be more conducive to the establishment of a wilaya. In doing so, Hapilon is said to have linked up with other extremists, including the shadowy Maute Group, which has recently shown pro-Islamic state tendencies of its own.<sup>41</sup>

The situation in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and the surrounding areas might evolve in a very unpredictable manner, where cells and individuals cast adrift by the conflict in Syria and Iraq could well fuse with local groups, even as these groups themselves seek to consolidate and collaborate. It cannot be ruled out that others might be co-opted into the mix, including crime syndicates (such as human trafficking rings) or even secessionist groups.<sup>w</sup> While much attention has been focused on the Islamic State threat to Europe, the potentially fertile ground for jihadi expansion in Southeast Asia means the future of the Islamic State terror threat may lie as much in the East as in the West. **CTC**

- u According to the Malaysian police, the cell planned to make Sabah (the part of East Malaysia close to the southern Philippines) a transit point for terrorists from Southeast and South Asia into Mindanao in the southern Philippines. The Filipino cell member was allegedly tasked to recruit new Islamic State members from Malaysia, Indonesia, and Bangladesh (including Rohingyas) into Mindanao, while the Bangladeshi cell members were thought to have connections to Islamic State-linked groups in Bangladesh and planned to travel to the southern Philippines. "Malaysia Arrests 4 for alleged involvement in new terror cell in Philippines," Channel NewsAsia, January 23, 2017.
- v Officials in the Philippines claimed Hapilon was injured in an assault on militants in January 2017. But these claims have not been corroborated, and there have been numerous mistaken claims over the years on the killing or wounding of key terrorist operatives in the region. Jim Gomez, "Philippine Offensive Reportedly Wounds Top Militant Suspect," Associated Press, January 27, 2017.

- w One example is the Chinese Uighur separatist movement. Thai authorities have, on various occasions, placed the blame for the 2015 Erawan Shrine attack in Bangkok on criminal networks responsible for the trafficking of Uighurs in and out of Southeast Asia. As noted earlier, the Isnlon Hapilon-led faction of the Abu Sayyaf Group has, over time, taken on an increasingly pro-Islamic State orientation, but this does not mean that it has completely forsaken its historical income-generating activities such as kidnapping, racketeering, and extortion. For the Abu Sayyaf Group specifically, see "Abu Sayyaf has 25-year record of kidnappings and bombings," CBCNews, April 25, 2016. For an example of other armed groups with grievances that are ancestral/territorial in nature and span national boundaries, see Gregory Poling, Phoebe DePadua, and Jennifer Frentasia, "Royal Army of Sulu Invades Malaysia," *CSIS Analysis*, March 8, 2013. The southern Thai secessionist insurgency, on the other hand, while having Islamist overtones, remains primarily driven by ethno-separatist concerns. The various movements implicated in the violence have never been conclusively linked to international terrorist groups in any organized sense. For more on the history and the groups involved, see "Thailand Islamic Insurgency," Global Security. See also Joshua Kurlantzick, "Thailand's Secessionist Muslim Insurgency Escalates," *National*, October 20, 2012.

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# The Fulani Crisis: Communal Violence and Radicalization in the Sahel

By Andrew McGregor

**Alongside the Islamist struggle to reshape society in the Sahel through violent means is a second, relatively unnoticed but equally deadly conflict with the dangerous potential of merging with jihadi efforts. At a time when resources such as land and water are diminishing in the Sahel, semi-nomadic Muslim herders of the widespread Fulani ethnic group are increasingly turning to violence against settled Christian communities to preserve their herds and their way of life. Claims of “genocide” and “forced Islamization” have become common in the region. What is primarily an economic struggle has already taken on an ethnic and religious character in Mali. If Nigeria follows the same path, it is possible that a new civil war could erupt with devastating consequences for all of West Africa.**

The Fulani,<sup>a</sup> an estimated 25 million people, range across 21 African countries from Mauritania’s Atlantic coast to the Red Sea coast in Sudan, though their greatest concentration is found in West Africa’s Sahel region.<sup>b</sup> The Fulani speak a common language (known as Fulfulde or Pulaar) but, due to their wide geographical range, are known by several other names in their host communities, including Fulbe, Fula, Peul, Peulh, and Fellata. Virtually all are Muslim. Roughly a third of the Fulani continue to follow a traditional semi-nomadic, cattle-rearing lifestyle that increasingly brings them into conflict with settled agriculturalists at a time of increased pressure on resources such as pastureland and water. They are typically armed to protect their herds from rustlers, wild animals, and other threats, and in recent years, the ubiquitous AK-47 has replaced the more common machete as the weapon of choice.

The Fulani began building states in the 18th century by mounting jihads against non-Islamic rulers in existing states in the Guinea-Senegal region. A Fulani Islamic scholar, ‘Uthman Dan Fodio, recruited Fulani nomads into a jihad that overthrew the Muslim

Hausa Amirs of the Sahel and attacked the non-Muslim tribes of the region in the first decade of the 19th century, forming a new kingdom in the process—the Sokoto Caliphate. Following Dan Fodio’s Islamic revolution, a whole series of new Islamic Emirates emerged in the Sahel under the Sokoto Caliphate, which fell to the British in 1903. There are accusations within Nigeria’s legislatures that the current Fulani-associated violence is simply the continuation of Dan Fodio’s jihad, an attempt to complete the Islamization of Nigeria’s middle belt and eventually its oil-rich south.<sup>1</sup>

Nomadic patterns and a significant degree of cultural variation due to their broad range in Africa have worked against the development of any central leadership among the Fulani. Traditional Fulani regard any occupation other than herding as socially inferior, though millions now pursue a wide range of occupations in West Africa’s urban centers.

## Herdsman vs. Farmers

Traditionally, Fulani herders would bring their cattle south during the post-harvest period to feed on crop residues and fertilize the land. Recently, however, environmental pressures related to climate change and growing competition for limited resources such as water and grazing land are driving herders and their cattle into agricultural areas year round, where they destroy crops.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, the herders are now entering regions they have never traveled through before. The growth of agro-pastoralism, where farmers maintain their own cattle, and the expansion of farms into the traditional corridors used by the herders have contributed to the problem. The resulting violence is equal in both number and ferocity to that inflicted by Boko Haram’s insurgency<sup>3</sup> but has attracted little attention beyond the Sahel, in part because it is treated as a local issue.

Confrontations over damaged crops are typically followed by armed herders responding to the farmers’ anger with violence, inevitably leading to reprisal attacks on herding camps by farming communities. Traditional conflict resolution systems involving compensation and mediation have broken down, partly because new waves of herdsmen have no ties to local communities.<sup>4</sup> The Fu-

a This article is based on primary sources from West African media as well as environmental and anthropological studies of the region.

b The Fulani/Peul are found in Nigeria, Benin, Egypt, Liberia, Mauritania, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Togo, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ghana, Mali, the Gambia, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, Côte d’Ivoire, Niger, Chad, and the Central African Republic.

c Boko Haram (a nickname for the group whose full name was Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wa’l-Jihad - People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad) changed its official name in April 2015 to Islamic State – Wilayat West Africa after pledging allegiance to the Islamic State movement. The West African Wilayat split into two groups after Islamic State leaders took the unusual step of removing Wilayat leader Abubakr Shekau. Shekau refused his dismissal and now competes with the “official” Wilayat West Africa led by Abu Musab al-Barnawi. “Boko Haram” continues to have wide popular usage for both factions. For more, see Jason Warner, “Sub-Saharan Africa’s Three New Islamic State Affiliates,” *CTC Sentinel* 10:1 (2017).

d This is based on the author’s own observations of developments in the Sahel over the past 20 years.

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*Sahel Region (Rowan Technology)*

lani, in turn, accuse their host communities of cattle rustling (theft) and therefore regard punitive violence against these communities as just and appropriate. The Fulani herders complain that they are otherwise faced with the choice of returning to lands that cannot sustain them or abandoning their lifestyle by selling their cattle and moving to the cities.<sup>4</sup>

With little protection offered by state security services against the incessant violence, many farmers have begun abandoning their plots to seek safety elsewhere, leading to food shortages, depopulation of fertile land, and further damage to an already fragile economy. Some see no future in negotiations: “We are calling on the state government to evacuate [the herders] from our land because they are not friendly; they are very harmful to us. We are not ready to bargain with them to prolong their stay here.”<sup>5</sup> Others have registered puzzlement that relations with “people who have always been around” (i.e. the herders) could have deteriorated so dramatically.<sup>6</sup>

### Nigeria’s Military Option

In late October 2016, Nigerian Defense Ministry spokesman Brigadier General Rabe Abubakar declared Boko Haram “100% defeated” and announced the launch of “Operation Accord,” a military campaign to “take care of the nuisance of the Fulani herdsmen once and for all.”<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, no mention was made of what kind of tactics would be employed to prevent ethnic nationalism and religious radicalism from further taking hold in the Fulani community.

A common complaint from victims of Fulani violence is that help from security services rarely materializes despite their assurances that security is a top priority. This has led to the formation of an-

ti-Fulani vigilante groups (some inspired by Borno State’s anti-Boko Haram “Civilian JTF”) that have few means and little inclination to sort out “bad” herders from “good.” Existing vigilante groups tend to have poor coordination with police services, perhaps deliberately in some cases due to suspicion that the security services sympathize with the herdsmen.<sup>8</sup> Earlier this year, the United Nations stated advance warnings of the April 2016 attack in Enugu State that killed 40 people had been ignored and noted that perpetrators of earlier attacks appeared to enjoy “complete immunity,” which encouraged threatened communities to “take justice into their own hands.”<sup>9</sup>

In Zamfara State, rural communities have complained of Fulani herdsmen committing murder, gang-rapes, destruction of property, and massive thefts of livestock while security services do nothing. Reprisals are now organized by a Hausa vigilante group named Yan Sakai. Though banned by the government, Yan Sakai continues to operate, escalating the violence through illegal arrests and summary executions.<sup>9</sup>

Delta State’s former commissioner of police Ikechukwu Aduba expressed exasperation with the growing crisis: “The problem is how do we contain [the herdsmen], especially with their peculiar mode of operation? The way these people operate is amazing. They will strike within five and six minutes and disappear... there is no way the police can be everywhere at the same time.”<sup>10</sup> Difficult terrain and poor communications complicate the matter, but the continued inability of the state to provide a reasonable degree of security damages public trust in authority and encourages an armed response in previously peaceful communities.

e One source declared the remarks were those of Chief of Defence Staff General Abayomi Olonishakin and were merely delivered by Brigadier Abubakar. See “Boko Haram is Gone Forever – CDS,” *Today* [Lagos], October 29, 2016.

f Though 40 was the number reported in Nigerian media, VOA gave a figure of 15 based on official police reports. See Chris Stein, “Farmer-Herder Conflict Rises across Nigeria,” VOA News, May 11, 2016, and United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, “Press briefing note on Mozambique and Nigeria,” April 29, 2016.



*Nigeria (Rowan Technology)*

One claim that has gained traction among leaders of the Igbo (a large ethnic group with an estimated population of 30 million people in southern Nigeria) is that the country's president, Muhammadu Buhari (a Fulani), is pursuing the Islamization of Nigeria by allowing Fulani herdsmen to murder Christians.<sup>11</sup> These claims were rejected on October 10, 2016, by the Sultan of Sokoto, Muhammadu Sa'ad Abubakar III, a Fulani and one of Nigeria's leading Islamic authorities: "The problem with herdsmen and farmers is purely about economy. The herdsman wants food for his cattle; the farmer wants his farm produce to feed his family."<sup>12</sup> There have been calls for the sultan to make a personal intervention, appealing to the Fulani's respect for "true leaders and their traditional institutions."<sup>13</sup> The sultan, however, like the cattle associations representing the herders, claims that those involved in the violence are "foreign terrorists ... the Nigerian herdsmen are very peace-loving and law-abiding."<sup>14</sup>

### Solutions?

Herdsmen cannot simply be outlawed. Despite the violence, they continue to supply the Sahel's markets with meat. Grazing reserves have been proposed as a solution, but since these are seen as a government transfer of land to commercial livestock operations, they are unpopular. Fulani herders often object that such reserves are inaccessible or already in use by other herders. In May 2016, some 350 federal and state legislators declared they would resist any attempt by the federal government to take land by force for use as grazing reserves. Others have argued that ranching on fenced private lands (preferably in the north, where ethnic and religious tensions are diminished) is the only solution for Nigeria, where questions of land

ownership remain politically charged.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, 10 Nigerian states moved ahead in August 2016 with allocating grazing lands to the herdsmen.<sup>16</sup>

Ranching would improve yields of meat and milk, both of which suffer from nomadic grazing. (Most of Nigeria's milk is now imported from the Netherlands.) According to House of Representatives minority leader Leo Ogor, "The solution lies in coming up with legislation that will criminalise grazing outside the ranches."<sup>17</sup> Governor of Benue State Samuel Ortom has said, "If we can copy the presidential system from America, why can't we copy ranching? But, you see, it is a gradual process and cannot be done overnight."<sup>18</sup>

Christians in Nigeria's Kaduna State complaining of daily kidnappings, killings, and rapes committed by herders have described the large Ladugga grazing reserve as an "incubator" for "all sorts of criminals that are responsible for the misfortune that has come to stay with us."<sup>19</sup> An editorial in a major Nigerian daily described the reserves as "a decoy" for Fulani herders to overrun and seize land from "unsuspecting natives." "It is incomprehensible how anyone expects the entire country to have grazing reserves carved out for Fulani herdsmen ... what else is the motive behind this adventure if it is not to grab land and have strategic power?"<sup>20</sup>

Three federal bills trying to establish grazing reserves and control of herd movement were dropped by Nigeria's senate last November after it was ruled such legislation must be enacted at the state level. This will likely result in a patchwork of efforts, however, to solve a problem that is, by its very nature, unconfined by state or national borders.<sup>21</sup>

In Ghana, joint military/police taskforces have been deployed to evict Fulani herdsmen from regions affected by communal vio-

lence.<sup>22</sup> Many of the herdsman are from Burkina Faso where pastureland has receded. To deal with what has been described as “a national security issue due to the crimes associated with the activities of the nomads,” Ghanaian President John Dramani Mahama announced that veterinary services and 10,000 hectares of land would be provided to the herdsman to discourage violent clashes with farmers.<sup>23</sup> The measure falls short of the ranching laws that have been promised since 2012 but have yet to be implemented.<sup>24</sup>

Dr. Joachim Ezeji, an Abuja, Nigeria-based water management expert, attributes the violence to poor water management practices in Nigeria that are “not robust enough to cope with the impacts of climate change,” suggesting soil restoration, reforestation, and the expansion of terrace-farming could aid the currently unproductive, sloping land.<sup>25</sup>

### Nigeria: Economic Struggle or Religious Conquest?

In early 2016, the streets of Abuja, Nigeria’s capital, began filling with Fulani herders and their livestock, snarling traffic and prompting fights between herders and beleaguered motorists. A ban on grazing in the federal capital had been widely ignored, and in October 2016, authorities began arresting herders and impounding their livestock.<sup>26</sup> The local government has obtained over 33,000 hectares of land as an alternative to grazing in the streets of the capital.<sup>27</sup>

The Nigerian capital, however, has yet to experience the herdsman-related violence that continues to afflict the following regions:

- Northwest (primarily Muslim): Kaduna and Zamfara States
- Middle Belt (ethnically heterogeneous and religiously mixed): Nasarawa, Taraba, Benue, Plateau, Adamawa, and Niger States
- South (primarily Christian and Animist): Ebonyi, Abia, Edo, Delta, and Enugu States

At times, Fulani gunmen have shown no fear of attacking senior officials. On his way to visit a displaced persons’ camp in April 2014, former Benue governor Gabriel Suswam’s convoy was ambushed by suspected Fulani herders who engaged the governor’s security detail in a one-hour gun-battle. Afterwards, Suswam told the IDPs:

*“This is beyond the herdsman; this is real war ... so, if the security agents, especially the military, cannot provide security for us, we will defend ourselves ... these Fulani are not like the real Fulani we used to know. Please return to your homes and defend your land; do not allow anybody to make you slaves in your homeland.”*<sup>28</sup>

The Ekiti State’s Yoruba<sup>g</sup> governor, Ayodele Fayose, has implemented laws designed to control the movements of the Fulani herdsman, much to their displeasure. A statement from the Mayetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association (MACBAN, a national group representing the interests of Fulani herders) suggesting that the new laws could “develop into [an] unquenchable inferno ... capable of creating uncontrollable scenarios” was interpreted by local

Yoruba as “a terror threat.”<sup>29</sup> The governor described the federal government’s failure to arrest those responsible for the MACBAN statement as proof of a plot “to provide tacit support” to the herdsman.<sup>30</sup> With clashes threatening to deteriorate into ethnic warfare, Fayose called on Ekiti citizens to defend their land against “these Philistines” whose character is marked by “extremism, violence, bloodshed, and destruction.”<sup>31</sup>

Some senior Christian clergy have alleged the influx of Muslim herders is a scheme by hard-pressed Boko Haram leaders “to deliberately populate areas with Muslims and, by the sheer weight of superior numbers, influence political decision-making.”<sup>32</sup> After herders killed 20 people and burned the community of Gogogodo (Kaduna State) on October 15, 2016, a local pastor described the incident in religious terms. “This is a jihad. It is an Islamic holy war against Christians in the southern part of Kaduna state.” Another said that like Boko Haram, the Fulani had a clear agenda “to wipe out the Christian presence and take over the land.”<sup>33</sup> As many as 14 Fulani were hacked to death in retaliatory attacks.<sup>34</sup>

In late February 2016, alleged herders reportedly massacred over 300 Idoma Christians in Agatu (Benue State). A retaliatory attack on a Fulani camp across the border in Nasarawa State on April 30 killed 20 herdsman and 83 cows.<sup>35</sup> After the killings, Nigeria’s senate moved a motion suggesting attacks attributed to Fulani herdsman were actually “a change in tactics” by Boko Haram. This view was roundly rejected by Benue State representatives in the House of Representatives, who castigated the president for his silence on the attacks. According to the leader of the Benue caucus, the incidents were an “unfolding genocide in Benue State by Fulani herdsman, a genocide that, typical of the Nigerian state, has been downplayed or ignored until it spirals out of control.”<sup>36</sup>

However, it is not only Nigeria’s farming communities that complain of “genocide.” For Nigeria’s Muslim Rights Concern (MURIC), attacks on “innocent Fulani” by vigilantes, rustlers, and security forces constitute an effort to eliminate Islam in Nigeria:

*“The Nigerian Muslim community as a stakeholder in nation-building is also aware of the symbiotic relationship between the Fulani and the religion of Islam and, by extension, the Muslim Ummah of Nigeria. Any hostile act against the Fulani is therefore an indirect attack on Muslims. Genocide aimed at the Fulani is indubitably mass killing of Muslims. It is war against Islam.”*<sup>37</sup>

There were further attacks in Benue allegedly by Fulani herdsman in late April 2016. A local Fulani *ardo* (community leader), Boderi Adamu, said that the attackers were not Fulani—he “heard people say they were foreigners”—but insisted that the Nigerian constitution provided free movement for all citizens within its borders, “so they cannot continue to stop us from finding pastures for our cows.”<sup>38</sup> However, as one Nigerian commentator observed, while “the constitution grants free movement to all its citizens, it does not grant free movement to hordes of animals with those citizens ... cows cannot overrun a whole country. It is unacceptable.”<sup>39</sup> Despite a January 6, 2017, agreement between Fulani herdsman and the majority Christian Agatu community in Benue State, violence erupted again on January 24 with 13 villagers and two herdsman killed during an attack by Fulani herders.<sup>40</sup>

### Ties to Boko Haram?

It is possible that some of those participating in the attacks on farming communities in Nigeria are former members of Boko Ha-

<sup>g</sup> The Yoruba are a West African ethnic group found primarily in southwestern Nigeria and southeastern Benin (“Yorubaland”). The Yoruba are roughly equally divided between Christianity and Islam, with some 10 percent remaining adherents of traditional Yoruba religious traditions. Religious syncretism runs strong in the Yoruba community, inspiring local religious variations such as “Chrislam” and the Aladura movement, which combines Christianity with traditional beliefs. Protestant Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on direct experience of God and the role of the Holy Spirit, is especially popular in many Yoruba communities.

ram who trade in violence, but coordination with the group itself is unlikely. Boko Haram is dominated by Kanuri rather than Fulani, and the rights of cattle-herders have not figured prominently in the group's Islamist agenda.

There are other differences from Nigeria's Boko Haram rebellion:

- Though many Boko Haram members are ethnic Kanuri, the Boko Haram insurrection never took on an ethnic character, and the movement's leadership has never claimed one.
- Boko Haram's identity and aims center on religion. The Fulani herders' main concern is with access to grazing land, although they are susceptible to religious agitation.
- Boko Haram's enemy (despite leader Abu Musab al-Barnawi's recent calls for attacks on Christians) has always been the state. Armed Fulani groups generally avoid confrontations with the state.
- Like most insurgent movements, Boko Haram has a central leadership that is generally identifiable despite the movement's best efforts to keep details murky. There is no guiding individual or committee behind the violence associated with the Fulani herders.

### Transition to Jihad: The Case of Mali

A significant concern is posed by the possibility that Nigeria might follow the pattern of Mali. There, young Fulani herdsmen have been recruited into jihadi movements, a break from the Fulani community's traditional support of the Bamako government as a balance to Tuareg and Arab power in northern Mali.<sup>41</sup>

Unlike other parts of the Sahel, there is a long tradition of Fulani "self-defense" militias in northern and central Mali. Known as Ganda Koy and Ganda Iso, these groups were generally pro-government in orientation but clashed repeatedly since 1990 with both separatist and loyalist Tuareg groups over land and access to water.

Some Fulani from central Mali and northern Niger joined the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) during the Islamist takeover of northern Mali in 2012.<sup>42</sup> Since France's Operation Serval in 2013 expelled most of the Islamists from the region, Fulani in the Mopti and Segou regions have experienced retaliatory violence and abuse from both the Malian military (including torture and summary executions) and Fulani jihadis who want to deter their brethren from cooperating with the Malian state, U.N. peacekeepers, or French troops.<sup>43</sup> The national army, the Forces Armées Maliennes (FAMA), are allegedly replicating the human rights abuses (arbitrary detention, torture, extrajudicial killings) that helped inspire rebellion in northern Mali.<sup>44</sup> According to one Fulani chief, "Our people don't associate the state with security and services, but rather with predatory behavior and negligence."<sup>45</sup>

After Operation Serval, many of the Fulani jihadis drifted into the Front de libération du Macina (FLM, aka Katiba Macina or Ansar al-Din Macina), a largely Fulani jihadi movement led by salafi preacher and Malian national Hamadoun Koufa. Based in the Mopti region in central Mali, the group takes its name from a 19th-century Fulani state. The Islamists spur recruitment by reminding young Fulanis that their traditional leadership has been unable to defend their people from Tuareg attacks or cattle-rustling, according to the author's research. The movement became formally allied with Ansar al-Din on May 19, 2016, but split off from Iyad Ag Ghali's mostly Tuareg jihadi movement in early 2017 due to ethnic

tensions, Hamadoun Koufa's dalliance with the rival Islamic State movement, and the FLM's failure to provide military support for Ansar al-Din.<sup>46</sup> Reports suggest that FLM leader Hamadoun Koufa has been engaged in discussions with the leader of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, regarding the creation of a new Fulani caliphate with Islamic State support.<sup>47</sup>

An unknown number of Fulani appear to have joined Mokhtar Belmokhtar's al-Murabitun movement. The group claimed that its January 17, 2017, suicide car-bomb attack that killed 77 members of the Malian Army and the Coordination of Azawad Movements coalition was carried out by a Fulani fighter, Abd al-Hadi al-Fulani.<sup>48</sup> The attack followed similar suicide attacks by Fulani jihadis. Though there was some confusion created by rival claims of responsibility for the November 20, 2015, attack on Bamako's Radisson Blu hotel from al-Murabitun and the FLM (allegedly in concert with Ansar al-Din), al-Murabitun maintained the attack was carried out by two Fulani jihadis.<sup>49</sup> A Fulani individual was also named as one of three men who carried out the January 15, 2016, attack on the Splendid Hotel and Cappuccino Café in the Burkina Faso capital of Ouagadougou, providing further proof of the growing attraction of jihad among some members of the Fulani community.<sup>50</sup>

Another militant Fulani group, formed in June 2016, is the "Alliance nationale pour la sauvegarde de l'identité peule et la restauration de la justice" (ANSPIRJ). Its leader, Oumar al-Janah, describes ANSPIRJ as a self-defense militia that will aggressively defend the rights of Fulani/Peul herding communities in Mali while being neither jihadi nor separatist in its ideology. ANSPIRJ deputy leader, Sidi Bakaye Cissé, claims that Mali's military treats all Fulani as jihadis. "We are far from being extremists, let alone puppets in the hands of armed movements."<sup>51</sup> In reality, al-Janah's salafi movement is closely aligned with the jihadi Ansar al-Din movement and participated in a coordinated attack with that group on a Malian military base at Nampala on July 19, 2016, that killed 17 soldiers and wounded 35.<sup>52</sup> ANSPIRJ's Fulani military emir, Mahmoud Barry (aka Abu Yehiya), was arrested near Nampala on July 27.<sup>53</sup>

Fulani groups that have maintained their distance from jihadis in Mali include:

- "The Mouvement pour la défense de la patrie" (MDP), led by Hama Founé Diallo, a veteran of Charles Taylor's forces in the Liberian Civil War and briefly a member of the rebel Mouvement National de Libération de L'Azawad (MNLA) in 2012. The MDP joined the peace process in June 2016 by allying itself with the pro-government Plateforme coalition.<sup>54</sup> Diallo says he wants to teach the Fulani to use arms to defend themselves while steering them away from the attraction of jihad.<sup>55</sup>
- "The Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance" (CMFPR) has split into pro- and anti-government factions since its formation in July 2012.<sup>56</sup> Originally an assembly of self-defense movements made up of Fulani and Songhai in the Gao and Mopti regions, both factions have many former Ganda Koy and Ganda Iso members.<sup>57</sup> The pro-government Plateforme faction is led by Harouna Toureh; the split-off faction is led by Ibrahim Abba Kantao, head of the Ganda Iso movement, and is part of the separatist Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA) coalition formed in June 2014. While Kantao appears to favor the separatism of Azawad, he is closer to the secular

MNLA than the region's jihadis.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

In highly militarized northern Mali, Fulani gunmen have begun to form organized terrorist or 'self-defense' organizations along established local patterns. If this became common elsewhere, it would remove community decision-making from locally based "cattle associations" and hand it to less representative militant groups with agendas that do not necessarily address the concerns of the larger community. In this case, the Fulani crisis could become intractable, with escalating consequences for West Africa.

In Nigeria, the state is not absent, as in northern and central Mali, but it is unresponsive. A common thread through all the attacks alleged to be the work of Fulani herdsmen, rustlers, or vigilante groups is the condemnation of state inaction by victims in the face of violence. This unresponsiveness breeds suspicion of collusion and hidden motives, weakening the state's already diminished authority, particularly as even elected officials urge communities to take up arms in self-defense.

There continues to be room for negotiated solutions, but attempts to radicalize Muslim herders will quickly narrow the room for new options. Transforming an economic dispute into a religious or ethnic war has the potential of destroying the social structure and

future prosperity of any nation where this scenario takes hold. For Islamist militants, the Fulani represent an enormous potential pool of armed, highly mobile fighters with intimate knowledge of local terrain and routes. In Nigeria, a nation whose unity and physical integrity is already facing severe challenges from northern jihadis and southern separatists, mutual distrust inspired by communal conflict has the potential to contribute to the outbreak of another civil war in Nigeria between northern Muslims and southern Christians and Animists.

Is the violence really due to "foreign terrorists," "Boko Haram operatives," and local gangsters posing as Fulani herdsmen? All are possible, to a degree, but none of these theories is supported by evidence at this point, and any combination of these is unlikely to be completely responsible for the onslaught of violence experienced in the Sahel. What is certain is that previously cooperative groups are now clashing despite the danger this poses to both farmers and herdsmen. The struggle for land and water has already degenerated into ethnic conflict in some places and is increasingly seen, dangerously, in religious terms by elements of Christian Nigeria. There is a real danger that this conflict could be hijacked by Islamist extremists dwelling on "Fulani persecution" while promoting salafi-jihadism as a radical solution. **CTC**

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